

“DEATH IS BUT THE NEXT GREAT ADVENTURE:” HARRY POTTER AND THE
ART OF DYING WELL

BY

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To my beloved wife Annie, and to my three imperfectly perfect children: Morgan,
Jeremiah, and Lincoln.

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ABSTRACT

Since its publication in 1954, *The Lord of the Rings* has served as a foundational text of fantasy literature. Tolkien's correspondence reveals that he regarded his novel as both a Christian text and a meditation on death and deathlessness. As such, the novel serves a similar function as an *ars moriendi*—a medieval guidebook on how to die well by emulating Christ's model. Although Middle-Earth is a decidedly pre-Christian setting, *The Lord of the Rings* nonetheless espouses a Christian ideal that a good death is not a matter of how one dies but why one dies. Those who lay down their lives in defense of others or for the sake of a better tomorrow are posited as heroes, whereas those who live selfishly and ignore all chances of redemption die ignominious deaths. Tolkien, then, positions the quest for deathlessness as a rejection of what it means to be human and dramatizes this rejection by having those characters who gain immortality unnaturally become warped and twisted by the endeavor into grotesque caricatures of their former selves.

J. K. Rowling has downplayed the influence of *The Lord of the Rings* on her Harry Potter series (1997-2007), yet while there are few cosmetic similarities to Tolkien's novel beyond the broadest of strokes, the two works are remarkably similar thematically. Intentionally or not, Rowling's Harry Potter novels are an even more overt example of a modern *ars moriendi*. Rowling foregrounds death and the pursuit of deathlessness from the very beginning of the series by having these ideas be not only thematic issues but also the primary drivers of the plot. Like Tolkien, Rowling's view of death is shaped by an explicitly Christian perspective, and the various examples of good

deaths that serve as lessons for both Harry and the reader reinforce the notion of selflessness and love as positive forces. Where Rowling differs from Tolkien is that she integrates her examination of an ignoble death with the quest for deathlessness into a single, salient example—Lord Voldemort—but still, she follows Tolkien’s model by having his quest for immortality bring about physical changes that leave him unrecognizable as a human being. Similarly, Harry himself serves as the most explicit example of a good death, for by the end of the series, he becomes a Christ-like figure, willingly going to what he believes will be his death for no other reason than because it will spare others from suffering and torment.

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INTRODUCTION

In a letter to Robert Murray, J. R. R. Tolkien acknowledges that “*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision” and goes on to note that “the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism” (172). Throughout his correspondence, however, Tolkien focuses less on the religious tenor of his novel than on a central theme: Death and Immortality. Writing to Christopher and Faith Tolkien in 1957, he acknowledges that themes such as power, domination, and war are all present in *The Lord of the Rings*, but he concludes that “the real theme is about something much more permanent and difficult: death and immortality” (246). Likewise, in a letter to Rhona Beare written in either in late 1958 or early 1959, he rejects that notion that the novel is an exploration of power, once again stating that “it is mainly concerned with Death and Immortality” (284).

For Tolkien, the theme of death is hardly unique to *The Lord of the Rings*. In a letter to Cees Ouboter, he notes that “most of human art & thought is similarly preoccupied” (172). Tolkien is hardly alone in perceiving the almost ubiquitous nature of death in literature. Italo Calvino observes that “the ultimate meaning to which all stories refer has two faces: the continuity of life, the inevitability of death” (253). In her exploration of death in contemporary adolescent fiction, Kathryn James argues “death is one of the few subjects that is of truly universal concern” (1). Likewise, Adriana Teodorescu notes that literature focuses heavily on death, if for no other reason than that it is the “unavoidable human reality” (1). Birth and death are the only universal experiences shared by all humanity, and while no one is cognizant of the first event when

it happens to them, everyone must eventually grapple with the reality of their own demise.

While the theme of death and dying might be, as Tolkien asserts, central to most artistic endeavors, the same cannot be said for immortality. In the introduction to *Death and the Serpent: Immortality in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Donald Hassler points out that prior to the nineteenth century, most Western discussions about immortality in art were largely limited to Biblical scholarship, the majority of which focused on the epistolary writings of Paul (3). Immortality remained largely confined to metaphysical discussions prior to the rise of speculative fiction, which flourished in part due to burgeoning scientific discoveries that suggested the mysteries of creation might not be as far removed from human understanding as previously thought. In his essay “On Fairy Stories,” Tolkien argues that one of the most primal longings is “the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death” (22). Perhaps it is therefore unsurprising that speculative fiction began to offer explorations of immortality.

J. K. Rowling has repeatedly downplayed the influence of *The Lord of the Rings* on the Harry Potter series.¹ Compared to some of Tolkien’s more obvious imitators, such as Terry Brooks’s *The Sword of Shannara* or Dennis McKiernan’s *The Iron Tower*, Rowling’s novels share very few obvious similarities to Tolkien’s beyond the broadest of strokes. Yes, Harry and Frodo are both orphans. They are both aided by wizened mentors,

¹ Rowling was first asked about the possible influence of Tolkien during an AOL chat in 2000. Subsequent articles that have addressed these questions include Malcom Jones’s interview for *Newsweek*, “The Return of Harry Potter,” and Les Grossman’s *Time* interview, “J. K. Rowling, Hogwarts and All,” as well as Sean Smith’s *J. K. Rowling: A Biography*. Smith claims that Rowling read her copy of *The Lord of the Rings* in college until it was almost dilapidated and carried it with her to Portugal—neither of which claim is substantiated by any other source. Rowling herself stated in the *Newsweek* interview for 2003 that she had not read much fantasy, claiming that she had not read *Lord of the Rings* since she was fourteen.

and they are aided in their quests by companions, some of whom will fall before the quest is completed. Likewise, Harry and Frodo contend against Dark Lords and must destroy objects that these Dark Lords have imbued with part of their essence to ensure their defeat. Beyond these rough parallels, the stories seemingly have little resemblance in terms of plot, structures, characters, or settings.

Thematically, however, the two works are remarkably similar. In many ways, the Harry Potter series serves as a discourse on death and dying, framing the concept of a “good death” in a specifically Judeo-Christian context. While J. K. Rowling initially refused to answer questions about her religious beliefs and continues to receive sharp criticism of her novels from various religious groups, she now openly avows her Christian faith. After the publication of the final book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Rowling admitted that she never “wanted to talk too openly about it [the religious element] because I thought it might show people who just wanted the story where we were going” (qtd. in Adler). Despite noting “the negative reaction the series has provoked in some Christian circles” (60), Beatrice Groves points out that the text lends itself to an explicitly Christian reading. Likewise, Connie Neal, Greg Garrett, and John Granger have shown how the Harry Potter series can be approached from a specifically Christian context. Given Rowling’s avowed religious beliefs, her narrative must be judged in terms of the established ethical framework of Christianity.

Critical studies of ethics in literature have often eschewed using such frameworks. One of the first critics to attempt to reconcile ethics with literary criticism was Northrop Frye. In his work *The Anatomy of Criticism*, he suggests that ethics manifest in literature as “the real presence of culture in a community” (63), by which he seems to mean that

ethics is merely an expression of cultural norms. Adam Newton notes in his work *Narrative Ethics* that Frye's assertion has been viewed as being too rooted in secular humanism and moral relativism; even so, he suggests, Frye's position is fundamentally in keeping with Aristotle, Kant, and Hume, all of whom regard ethics as a set of social obligations closely tied to personal autonomy and guided by reason (13). In contrast, Newton argues that understanding the ethics of a work requires examining what he terms "moral situations," which are then judged in terms of their "intersubjectivity" to each other and not to any external factors or frameworks (12). What Newton fails to consider is whether a text could be evaluated against an established moral code and explored in terms of how it compares and contrasts moral situations to establish a consistent ethical pattern.

Not only does Rowling affirm her own Christian beliefs, but the novels were produced in a mostly Christian society, and as such, they have to be considered in terms of how they situate death as a moral response to societal norms. In *Death Representations in Literature*, Adrianna Teodorescu laments that there are far too many "studies that focus on death as a literary theme with no anchors in the social reality" (1). Rosemary Jackson argues that "like any other text, a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context. Though it might struggle against the limits of this context, often being articulated upon that very struggle, it cannot be understood in isolation from it" (3). In other words, Jackson suggests that texts must be considered in relationship to the cultures that produce them, often because they reveal hidden cultural desires, and notes that fantasy literature can work to "expel desire, when this desire is a disturbing element that threatens cultural order and continuity" (3-4). Unfortunately,

Jackson tends to be overly dismissive of authors, such as Tolkien, who adhere to established moral frameworks. Instead of closely examining what desires such works reveal, she argues that they merely attempt to evoke a “lost moral and social hierarchy” (2). Furthermore, she asserts that when the works do dispel social desires, these desires are displaced with what she terms “religious longing and nostalgia” (9). Despite Jackson’s assertion that her dismissal is not born out of “any prejudice on her part” (9), her overall concern does seem to be rooted in the fact that there are fundamentally religious elements deeply rooted in the narratives.

In part at least, Jackson’s reticence to examine those fantasists who have closely adhered to religious ideologies is because the critical approach she employs is Marxist and Existentialist. As Carl Yoke puts it, “death is viewed by the Existentialists as the ultimate absurdity” (7). Jackson argues that works of literary fantasy should evoke “existential dis-ease [sic] in the reader” (10). What Jackson seems to be suggesting, then, is that literary fantasy, which she holds to be the higher art form, is differentiated from works that employ fantasy elements, such as heroic romances, by the ways in which the works challenge the notion that death is somehow an inevitability. Those which struggle against such notions and force the reader to confront their own mortality are, in Jackson’s estimation, far more worthy of being called literary fantasy.

Apart from the problematic gatekeeping inherent in her assertions, Jackson also seems to be insisting on a false dichotomy rooted in the belief that a work cannot challenge our views about death and dying while relying on an understanding of our own mortality framed in a Judeo-Christian context. If, as Tolkien asserts, our desire to escape from death is one of our deepest impulses, then texts that assert that we must accept

physical death as an inevitability would seem to force us into those moments of “existential dis-ease” far more than those which would suggest that we might somehow transcend mortality by our own actions. In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger, also an Existentialist philosopher, ultimately arrived at the belief that death is what actually makes us human. The French Existentialist Maurice Blanchot argued that “death is man’s greatest hope, his only hope of being man” (47). To rail against that is futile, or worse, would lead us to becoming *inhuman* if we could, somehow, overcome that limitation.

Like Tolkien before her, Rowling posits true immortality, as opposed to serial longevity, as something outside the reach of human ingenuity. Immortal beings exist, but they are explicitly *not* human. When Voldemort, the Dark Lord of the Harry Potter series, attempts to achieve immortality through nefarious means, he starts down a path that erodes away his very humanity. Voldemort’s slippage from humanity to inhumanity brought about by seeking immortality is paired with overt physical changes which result in various grotesque and monstrous forms. In her work *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva introduces the term “abjection,” which she identifies as a more violent form of the uncanny—that which can no longer be recognized as self (5). The abject, she asserts, exists “beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (1). Kristeva equates abjection to revulsion and disgust, noting that those things which most strongly trigger these reactions are those related to decay and death, such as open wounds and decomposing corpses. Abjection, then, serves as a useful critical tool for explaining how these works function as Jackson asserts—to expel a dangerous desire that threatens social order. Kristeva seeks to distinguish her notions of abjection as being an offshoot of the Freudian concept of the uncanny. While her ideas are particularly useful in examining the

authors explored in this dissertation, Freud's ideas about the discomfiture caused by the uncanny, the "horror and creeping dread," aroused by that which is both familiar and alien (Freud 1), are also applicable. Through Voldemort, Rowling uses both the abjectionable and the uncanny to physically represent what would otherwise be unseen—the corruption of his very soul.

Juxtaposing death and deathlessness allows Rowling to examine what it means to be human and to live a good life. It also allows her to embrace a seeming paradox: that life is precious, to be protected and treasured, but a good death is not something to fear. In *The Sweet and the Bitter*, Amy Amendt-Raduege argues that *The Lord of the Rings* functions similarly to "an *ars moriendi*—a guide to the art of dying well" (3). In many ways, the Harry Potter series serves as an even more overt guidebook to dying. Rowling adheres to the idea that death can be ennobling, for a good death involves self-sacrifice to defend others or for a greater cause. She then explicitly connects this to Biblical teachings, showing that Harry's willingness to die is rooted in love for his friends, echoing John 15:13. In sharp contrast, those who chase after false immortality are shown to have wanton disregard for life and a willingness to engage in monstrous acts. Moreover, a clear contrast is made between Harry's actions, which are selfless and rooted in love, and Voldemort's, which are purely selfish and loveless.

This dissertation closely examines Rowling's work as an example of an *ars moriendi*, a guide to living and dying well, by contextualizing her presentation of death, life, and immortality with Tolkien's seminal work. The dissertation also explores how Rowling frames death and immortality as an ethical discourse, much as Tolkien does, by

contrasting the willingness to die for a greater purpose with the self-serving desire for endless life, through the actions and attitudes of Harry and Voldemort.

This Introduction briefly examines *The Lord of the Rings* as a mediation on death and immortality, as well as establishing the text as being one of the most influential works on the genre. As Terry Pratchett notes,

J.R.R. Tolkien has become a sort of mountain, appearing in all subsequent fantasy in the way that Mt. Fuji appears so often in Japanese prints. Sometimes it's big and up close. Sometimes it's a shape on the horizon. Sometimes it's not there at all, which means that the artist either has made a deliberate decision against the mountain, which is interesting in itself, or is in fact standing on Mt. Fuji. (86)

Despite the somewhat humorous nature of Pratchett's observation, there is more than a kernel of truth to his statement. While it would be incorrect to contend that Tolkien invented the fantasy genre, his influence is monumental, particularly in terms of thematic content.

Chapter One, "Death and Deathlessness in Tolkien," examines how Tolkien explores death and immortality through a Christian perspective, specifically one rooted in conceptions of love and selflessness. Rather than presenting death as a negative, Tolkien presents the notion of a "good death," often by contrasting selfless death for the benefit of others with the selfish pursuit of death and an end to perceived suffering. It will also explore how Tolkien uses the uncanny and the abjectionable to present immortality achieved through any means other than Grace as something to be abhorred, as well as the ways in which his work even echoes existentialist views that death makes us human. Finally, this chapter establishes how the exploration of death and immortality present in Tolkien's work serves as a means for examining Rowling's work as well.

Chapter Two of this dissertation, “Gone but Not Forgotten: Harry’s Exemplars in Facing Death,” examines the ways in which death and loss shape Harry Potter’s life and morality, starting with the death of his parents when he is still just an infant. In learning about the death of his parents, Harry begins to formulate his own understanding of what it means to die well, particularly when he learns that his mother’s sacrifice was a deliberate choice. Throughout the series, Harry loses numerous friends and allies, and each of these deaths serves to instruct Harry (and therefore the reader) in the ways to have a good death. Initially, these deaths are traumatic for Harry, and he has trouble processing the loss of even a friendly rival, like Cedric Diggory. Initially, the loss of his godfather, Sirius Black, causes even greater emotional turmoil for Harry, but with Dumbledore’s guidance, he can properly process and grieve the loss. Throughout the series, as Harry grows and matures, he is faced with even more loss, but time and again, he is shown that so many people are willing to lay down their lives not because they seek death, but because they love others.

Chapter Three, “The Life and Ignoble Death of Tom Marvolo Riddle,” focuses entirely on Voldemort and his quest for immortality. Tom Riddle, an admittedly troubled young boy, is shown from a young age to equate dying with powerlessness, which leads him to expressly reject traditional Judeo-Christian morals in his attempts to gain power—most explicitly, the power to forestall death itself. Fear of death twists his morality into something perverse, and as his soul withers, his countenance reflects that damage that he has done to himself. At various points throughout the series, Harry encounters aspects of Voldemort in various states of moral and physical degradation, ranging from the shockingly normal-seeming Tom Riddle that he encounters in *Chamber of Secrets* to the

wretched thing he witnesses in King's Cross near the conclusion of *Deathly Hallows*. Through these differing versions of Voldemort, Rowling ties the quest for deathlessness to an ever-increasing disregard for human life. Because he knows only obsessive self-interest, Riddle is incapable of love for others, and thus, doomed to die an ignoble death.

Chapter Four, "The Master of Death," focuses on Harry Potter himself, exploring how he accepts his own death at multiple points in the narrative, while at the same time valuing the lives of others, even his enemies. Harry's unwillingness to use lethal force against anyone and his selfless desire to protect others are what establish him as Rowling's ultimate exemplar. While Harry is not a Christian character, in that he is never shown to have any religious beliefs in the narrative and even misattributes Biblical passages to Death Eaters' rhetoric, he exists within an explicitly Christian world, and by fully embracing his greatest power—the ability to love—he becomes a Christlike figure in the narrative.

Finally, the Conclusion, "Tolkien (and Rowling's) Lingered Legacy," examines how Rowling compares to Tolkien in terms of their philosophical development of the ideas of death and deathlessness. Just as *The Lord of the Rings* offers perspectives on how to approach our own mortality, so too does the Harry Potter septology serve as a guidebook about how to live well and how to die well. Western fantasy seems to cling to an overly Judeo-Christian message: living well requires the denial of self, of putting others first, so that our lives, and our deaths, have meaning. The conclusion will point to numerous fantasy texts to show how this idea resounds with authors of all faiths and convictions and permeates the genre, suggesting that the underlying theme of almost all

fantasy is that we should focus less on ourselves as individuals and more on the collective good of all.

CHAPTER ONE: “DEATH AND DEATHLESSNESS” IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

While it is inarguable that fantasy literature predates J. R. R. Tolkien’s contribution to the genre, it is almost equally inarguable that his work established many of the tropes that persist in much of fantasy literature today. With the exception of the Inklings, which included C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams, Tolkien’s direct influence extended only to his students at Leeds and then Oxford, and yet in 1980, Brian Attebery declared “no important work of fantasy written after Tolkien is free of his influence, and many are merely halting imitations of his style and substance” (10). While there have been authors such as Michael Moorcock who have attempted to distance themselves from Tolkien—Moorcock even lambasted his predecessor’s writing in his essay “Epic Pooh,”²—the very attempt to try to write contrary to Tolkien requires a fundamental acceptance of his importance to the genre. As Edward James puts it in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (2012), “most subsequent writers of fantasy are either imitating him or else desperately trying to escape his influence” (62). Many fantasy authors themselves openly acknowledge Tolkien’s importance. Terry Brooks, author of the *Sword of Shannara*, admits to being directly inspired by and modelling his work after *The Lord of the Rings*: “I would set my adventure story in an imaginary world, a vast, sprawling mythical world like that of Tolkien, filled with magic that had replaced science and races

² Moorcock’s central argument is that Tolkien espouses rural, middle-class values and tacit acceptance of monarchical government, as evidenced by making Samwise Gamgee the real hero of the story and Aragorn’s coronation, respectively. The entire essay is an attempt to “take down” the reputation of Tolkien, but it mostly focuses on Moorcock’s own issues with the bourgeois and the Crown rather than offering substantive analysis of Tolkien.

that had evolved from Man” (188). While David Eddings³ argues that most authors try to look elsewhere for inspiration, he still states that “all modern fantasists bow to Papa Tolkien” (6). In a 1994 interview with Stan Nichols, he even argued that Tolkien “seems to have established the parameters of what fantasy is” (26). Likewise, French critic Anne Besson in 2011 argues that numerous fantasy authors have taken considerable inspiration from Tolkien, tapping into a “reservoir of motifs, characters and narrative structures made available for the development of the genre” (142). While Besson concludes that Tolkien has not had as much of an impact on French fantasy literature as he has had on works in English, even she acknowledges that his influence is, nonetheless, still detectable. Given that *The Lord of The Rings* is “about Death and the desire for deathlessness” (Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* 262), it is unsurprising then that these themes seem to dominate Anglophone fantasy.

This chapter provides an overview of how Tolkien approaches death and the desire for deathlessness from a fundamentally Christian perspective. *The Lord of the Rings* interlinks these themes as a way of exploring what it means to be human and grapple with our own certainty of our mortality. Building upon existing criticism that argues Tolkien is providing a contemporary ars moriendi, a guidebook on how to die well, I argue that *The Lord of the Rings* not only provides a philosophy for facing mortality, but also a way of living morally and selflessly to ensure that death matters.

³ Eddings has fully admitted to switching to fantasy literature after the failure of his contemporary adventure novel, *The Losers*, after finding a copy of *The Two Towers* on a local bookshelf in the late seventies and realizing that it was not only still selling, but selling well given that it was in its 73rd printing (Nichols 27). Likewise, Phillip Martin claims that “J. R. R. Tolkien is generally considered to be the first superstar of fantasy literature,” which seems to emphasize his commercial viability most of all (14).

Although Tolkien discussed the importance of death and immortality in numerous private letters, in at least one well-documented instance, he publicly declared the importance of death as a central theme. In response to the growing popularity of *Lord of the Rings* throughout the 1960s, particularly amongst college students at the time, the BBC aired a presentation *Tolkien in Oxford* in 1968. The presentation spliced together footage of students discussing his work with an interview with Tolkien himself. In the midst of discussing the origin of *The Hobbit* and the invention of the Elvish language, he paused to read a quote from Simone de Beauvoir:

“There is no such thing as a natural death: nothing that happens to a man is ever natural, since his presence calls the whole world into question. All men must die: but for every man his death is an accident and, even if he knows it and consents to it, an unjustifiable violation.” Well, you may agree with the words or not, but those are the key spring of *The Lord of the Rings*. (*Tolkien in Oxford*)

Given Tolkien’s own views that the main themes of *The Lord of the Rings* are death and deathlessness,⁴ it is unsurprising then that considerable critical attention has been given to these twin themes, yet rarely are they considered together. For example, many of the articles that tackle deathlessness in Tolkien’s writings tend to focus exclusively on Elvish immortality, and even then, the emphasis tends to be on the posthumously published legendarium than on his finished literary production.⁵ Critics such as Jon Odriozola, Grant Sterling, and William Stoddard, on the other hand, have tended to focus on both

⁴ In some of his letters, he terms it “immortality,” but he clarifies this to mean “serial longevity” as opposed to true immortality (“To Rhona Bare” 284).

⁵ Milon’s “Mortal Immortals: The Fallibility of Elven Immortality in Tolkien’s Writing,” is one of the few that addresses immortality in *The Lord of the Rings*, but it does so in the context of Arwen’s choice to yield her immortality. Gaëlle Abaléa’s article “Transmission: An Escape from Death in Tolkien’s Work?” focuses on *The Silmarillion*, as does Rodrigo Ramos’s article “Eucatastrophe and the Redemption in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion*.” Massimiliano Izzo does explore the dichotomy of death and immortality in Tolkien’s work, but his focus is outside *The Lord of the Rings*.

The Lord of the Rings and *The Silmarillion* in order to fully explore the thematic importance of death and dying, particularly as it applies to humans as opposed to the immortal elves. While Sterling's essay "The Gift of Death": Tolkien's Philosophy of Mortality" focuses heavily on *The Silmarillion*, Sterling nonetheless does spend some time on the character of Aragorn, noting that Aragorn accepts death as "the inevitable counterpoint to the gift of life, and nothing to be feared" (17). Stoddard, on the other hand, is more preoccupied with pointing out sources that inspired Tolkien's work and claims that in *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien "embodies a distinctively pagan conception of the fate of the dead" (152). Of the three, Odriozola's essay "The Theological Meaning of Tolkien's 'Death as a Gift'" offers the most thorough exploration of *Lord of the Rings*, and argues that "Tolkien's literary masterpiece is not an allegory about the struggle for power, but a profound investigation of the human condition, a literary reflection on human earthly existence" (38).

By far, however, the most ambitious study of death in Tolkien's work is Amy Amendt-Raduege's "*The Sweet and the Bitter:*" *Death and Dying in J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*. The main thesis of the work is that *The Lord of the Rings* is a sort of contemporary *Ars moriendi*, serving a comparable function to the two extant works bearing that title from the late middle ages:⁶ instructing the reader on how to die well. Specifically, these early medieval works tie the concept of dying well to Christian principles and seem to point towards a cultural concept that was well established in Western Europe in the time period, but as historian Bernard Capp points out, these

⁶ Two works from the 15th century bear this title, but it is also widely considered a genre of writing as well that follows the same basic set of conventions. In most instances, I am referring to the genre, not the specific texts, though here, I am referencing them by title.

attitudes persist even after the Reformation, where they are “suitably reformulated” and “disseminated through prescriptive and descriptive accounts of exemplary deaths to edify the dying, their families, and other godly readers” (5). Amendt-Raduege contends that Tolkien’s work, as a study of death and dying, is best understood in this context. While she acknowledges that “the traditional *ars moriendi* no longer exist as such,” she also argues that fiction often takes on a similar function (8). Accordingly, *The Lord of the Rings* provides a number of exemplary, edifying deaths. Not only does it show characters who overcome “failure of faith, desperation (despair), impatience, vainglory, and unwillingness to let go of worldly things,” but it also reaffirms the values of the church and offers up characters who are *imitatio Christi*, with particular “focus on Christ’s actions on the cross as a guide” (9). In contrast to the good deaths, Amendt-Raduege also points out that “a book so concerned with death could not avoid also depicting less than noble ends,” and notes that many of the bad deaths are the result of “treachery against basic human principles” (31). While she has several examples of characters who die within the text to draw from as obvious candidates for a bad death, she nonetheless devotes an entire chapter to ghosts in Middle-Earth, pointing out that these are some of Tolkien’s most obvious examples of bad deaths and the lingering consequences thereof.

That Tolkien should choose to explore death in a fundamentally Christian manner is in keeping with his assertions that “*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision” (“To Robert Murray” 172). At the same time, he also acknowledged that he had pruned any references to anything resembling religion, Christian or otherwise, from the text, and that the “religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism” (172). In other

correspondence, Tolkien confessed to “having set myself a task, the arrogance of which I fully recognized and trembled at: being precisely to restore to the English an epic tradition and present them with a mythology of their own” (“To Mr. Thompson” 230-231). To some extent, these two admissions on Tolkien’s part help to explain why some critics seem compelled to try to downplay, if not outright ignore, the Christian elements in favor of pagan ones.⁷ Verlyn Flieger’s essay “But What Did He Really Mean?” points out that neopagans have readily embraced the text as much as traditional Christians have, and argues that “the same cherries can be picked on both sides to support contending positions” (149).⁸ In “Tolkien’s Work: Is it Christian or Pagan? A Proposal for a “Synthetic” Approach,” Claudio Testi concludes that “Tolkien’s mythology, as proved by its universal appreciation as well as by the most recent critical studies, is meant neither for a single nation (England) nor a specific religion (be it Christian or Pagan), but for ‘all of Mankind’” (30). While there is no doubt that the text has achieved a certain degree of universality,⁹ Testi seems to ready to dismiss the essential elements of the text that point towards a Christian context.

⁷ *Tolkien the Pagan? Reading Middle-earth through a Spiritual Lens* offers various examinations of the text from various alternative, non-Christian perspectives, including the essay “Also Sprach Feanor, Spirit of Fire: A Nietzschean Reading of Tolkien’s Mythology?” which argues that Morgoth could be read as the Judeo-Christian God. Given that he calls Morgoth’s plans “satanic” on numerous occasions in his letters, this is an absolutely bizarre claim.

⁸ To be blunt, the same can be said of much of medieval scholarship. The vast body of work produced trying to determine if *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a pagan text with a thin veneer of Christianity washed over it or a genuinely Christian text that simply preserves pagan superstitions and elements attests to this fact. Given Tolkien’s own admiration of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, perhaps it is fitting that his text has drawn some similar comparisons, though in this case, we do have the author stating his actual intent. In his letters, Tolkien makes it very clear that while the story is mythic, it is also monotheistic (“To Michael Strait” 237).

⁹ Some part of which is, admittedly, due to Peter Jackson’s film adaptations.

Tolkien's choice to blend disparate elements from Norse and Celtic mythology with pre-Christian beliefs and customs (including those about funerary customs), reflects something other than an affinity for neopaganism, however. As Linda Greenwood points out, "he takes elements of ancient Northern literature and pictures of the Christian myth and interweaves them to create something relevant to modern reality" (172). In doing so, she suggests Tolkien accomplishes what Derrida called "the possibility of religion without religion" (171). The choice to include elements such as elves and dwarves seems to come from his own predilection for "fairy-stories," while the exclusion of overtly religious elements stems from another decision on his part:

Middle-Earth, by the way, is not a name of a never-never land without relation to the world we live in . . . it is just a use of Middle English *middle-erde* (or *erthe*), altered from Old English *Middangeard*: the name for the inhabited lands of Men between the seas. And though I have not attempted to relate the shape of the mountains and land masses to what geologist may say or surmise about the nearer past, imaginatively this history is supposed to take place in a period of the actual Old World of this planet. (Tolkien, "To Houghton Mifflin" 220)

Simply put, Tolkien excludes all references to religion because the story in *The Lord of the Rings* takes place in our own distant history. How then could he refer to Christ directly when Christ has not yet come? Grace has yet to be delivered unto the world, and so, in a pre-Christian time, the world represented in the story must also be pre-Christian in order to achieve what Tolkien himself termed "the inner consistency of reality" ("On Fairy Stories" 15). The beliefs and customs of the peoples of Middle-Earth reflect seemingly pagan traditions simply because the people of Middle-Earth lack the same conceptions of the divine that Christian readers possess, not because Tolkien is espousing a sort of neopagan philosophy. If anything, Tolkien's heroic characters adhere to what is

fundamentally a Christian moral code, and while “divine authority is never invoked in the making of moral decisions, [. . .] moral decisions are made, and often conscientiously” (Madsen 44).

Taking Tolkien at his word, that *The Lord of the Rings* is both fundamentally Catholic and a study of death and deathlessness, we must turn our attention to the ways in which he presents death within the text. Of the nine members of the Fellowship who set out from Rivendell with the intent of destroying the ring, two are slain in the course of their adventure: Boromir and Gandalf. In some ways, Boromir’s death stands as a clearer example for the reader of how to live and die well. After his failed attempt to take the ring from Frodo by force, Boromir rushes to the aid of Merry and Pippin as they are beset by orcs. Aragorn hears Boromir’s horn sounding and comes rushing, but he is too late. Instead, he finds Boromir “pierced with many black-feathered arrows; his sword was still in his hand but it was broken by the hilt; his horn, cloven in two, was by his side” (413). Still holding onto life, Boromir speaks, first confessing that he attempted to steal the ring, and then voicing his concern for the hobbits. His last words, however, are self-recrimination: “Go to Minas Tirith and save my people! I have failed!” (414). Instead of castigating him for his failures, however, Aragorn tells him, “You have conquered. Few have gained such a victory. Be at peace” (414). Were Aragorn simply evoking a pagan warrior ethos here, his great victory would ostensibly be the twenty or more dead orcs lying at Boromir’s feet. After all, on the surface, “Boromir appears very much the traditional medieval hero. His are the dominant traits of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse heroes: physical strength, pride, and prowess” (Amendt-Raduege 22). If this were the case, however, then Tolkien would have put far more emphasis on the battle. Instead, all

that he reveals is the aftermath of the fight. Aragorn finds him and learns of his fate, but he does not witness a great battle. Instead, he arrives just moments before Boromir's passing. While Amendt-Raduege contends that in his death "the conventions of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse heroic ideals and the *ars moriendi* meet and merge" (27), in her essay "Boromir, Byrhtnoth, and Bayard: Finding a Language for Grief in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," Lynn Forest-Hill argues that what Tolkien's work shows is a movement from Anglo-Saxon (and therefore pagan) pessimism about death towards a more Christian understanding of redemption, pointing out that Boromir is contrite and self-aware, which "are, of course, the required steps in the sacrament of Confession in the Roman Catholic faith" (81). In explaining the religion of Middle-Earth as he had envisioned it outside of the context of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien notes that among the Numenoreans of old, the kings served the function of priests ("To Robert Murray" 206). Not only does Boromir confess his sins, he does so to Aragorn, who also seemingly absolves him of guilt. The victory he wins is in mastering himself. He overcomes the lust for the Ring and instead gives his life to protect Merry and Pippin, proving his true mettle as a hero in a Christian sense of sacrifice.

Gandalf's death is, in many ways, far more complicated to wrangle with from a critical perspective. Unlike Boromir, who is but a mortal man, Gandalf is an immortal being, one of the Maiar. In Tolkien's legendarium, the Valar are powerful angelic beings who serve the will of Eru Ilúvatar, the supreme being. The Maiar then, in turn, serve the Valar as lesser angelic beings. At the beginning of the Third Age, during which *The Lord of the Rings* is set, the Valar send five Maiar, the Istari, into the Middle-Earth in the form of old men, with the purpose of guiding the lesser races in the struggle against Sauron. Of

these, Gandalf alone “remained true to that mission, even to the point of death” (16). Gandalf’s death is actually the first major loss that the Fellowship endures, coming during their exploration of the Mines of Moria. There, they encounter a Balrog, “a dark form, of man-shape maybe, yet greater; and a power and terror seemed to be in it and to go before it” (Tolkien 329). Even though he warns them that the Balrog is too great an adversary for them, when he faces the demonic creature, Aragorn, and Boromir both spring forward to come to his aid. In response, “Gandalf lifted his staff, and crying aloud, he smote the bridge before him” (330). In that moment, Gandalf’s staff breaks, the bridge shatters beneath the Balrog’s feet, and both fiend and wizard fall into the pit. The two engage in a titanic struggle, unbeknownst to the eight survivors, which ends with the Balrog defeated, though not without cost. Gandalf the Grey, overtaxed by the effort, dies. On this point, Tolkien himself is very explicit. It is why so much of the criticism regarding Gandalf focuses on his Christ-like aspect, for not only does he die, but he is also revived and “sent back—for a brief time; until my task is done” (502). Mark Stucky latches onto this element of Gandalf’s character as the most salient example of his Christ-like aspects. In “Middle Earth's Messianic Mythology Remixed,” Stucky claims that Gandalf’s resurrection is the most explicit example of Christian symbolism in the text, though this is hardly a viewpoint shared by all critics. Charles Nelson argues that Gandalf’s greatest virtue is his humility, specifically in that he is cognizant of his own limitations (54). Amendt-Raduege points out that “the concepts of humility and sacrifice” are central to understanding Tolkien’s view of Christian heroism (15). Thus, Gandalf’s heroism, like that of Boromir, is defined not by the foe that he fights, but by his willingness to sacrifice himself. In Richard Purtill’s view, Gandalf’s sacrifice is not

lessened by his nature: “Gandalf, who gives up his life for his friends on the bridge of Khazad-dûm, is not an allegorical mask for Christ: he is a free creature who freely answers the call to imitate Christ” (118). So even though Gandalf is not, strictly speaking, human, while he remains in Middle Earth, he is still susceptible to the same privations that we all must endure. That he dies and returns is symbolic of Christianity, but only because he offers himself up as a sacrifice to save others.

Arguably, Tolkien’s most profound exploration of heroism as a sacrificial act comes after the siege of Gondor. After Sauron’s forces are driven back from the city momentarily, Gandalf calls a council and discusses what has to happen next. He tells those assembled about the Ring of Power and warns that if Sauron regains it “your valour is vain, and his victory will be swift and complete; so complete that none can foresee the end of it while this world lasts” (878). He reveals that their one hope is that Sauron still does not know where the Ring is, and to ensure that Frodo has every chance to destroy the ring, they will have to allow Sauron to think that he is setting a trap for the forces of Gondor:

We must walk open-eyed into that trap with courage, but small hope for ourselves. For, my lords, it may well prove that we ourselves shall perish utterly in a black battle far from the living lands; so that even if Barad-dur be thrown down, we shall not live to see a new age. But this, I deem, is our duty. And better so that to perish nonetheless—as we surely shall if we sit here—and know as we die that no new age shall be. (880)

Aragorn is the first to answer the call, but as he has not yet claimed his crown, he refuses to compel any other to their doom, allowing instead that each should choose for himself. In making it a choice, rather than a king’s command, Tolkien casts this moment not as

soldiers simply following orders but as heroes willing to lay down their lives without any assurance that what they do will be meaningful. All they have is hope, and Gandalf makes it clear that it might not even be hope for themselves. They might well be laying down their lives simply for the sake of generations yet to come. In “Death and Dying in Literature” John Skelton argues that “one of the central tasks of literature is to impose a structure on life and death, giving meaning to both” (213). Central to his argument, however, is the notion that shared cultural connections are what help to establish this meaning. Tolkien draws from the shared culture of Judeo-Christian tradition to present the one rational capitulation that could be offered in support of willing mass slaughter—that it would somehow safeguard the future. Each warrior following Gandalf and Aragorn to the Black Gate must then decide for themselves whether they are willing to sacrifice their lives for others—whether they would seek to emulate Christ in his actions upon the cross.

Tolkien also provides examples of ignoble deaths, which serve as counterpoints to the idealized, heroic death born out of selflessness. Amendt-Raduege points to Denethor, who driven by despair, takes his own life, viewing his own death as “nothing more than an ending: an escape from this world, maybe, but not an entry into anything new” (35). Denethor suffers a failure of faith, and as such, he throws away his own life. As Amendt-Raduege notes, suicide “is the ultimate failure of faith, the first of the temptations refuted in the *ars moriendi*” (35). While Denethor might be the only character to actually kill himself, he is not, however, the only character to display suicidal ideation in *The Lord of the Rings*. After Frodo is attacked and seemingly slain by Shelob, Sam tries to motivate himself to keep going. He briefly contemplates vengeance against Gollum,

“but that was not what he had set out to do. It would not be worthwhile to leave his master for that” (731). Realizing that he does not have the temperament for vengeance, he instead looks on Frodo and thinks “they had better both be dead together” (731). For a brief moment, he contemplates suicide, but “he thought of the places behind where there was a black brink and an empty fall into nothingness. There was no escape that way. That was to do nothing, not even grieve” (731). In “The Stolen Gift,” Martin Lockerd examines depictions of suicide and suicidal thoughts throughout Tolkien’s work. He argues that “As a champion of life, however momentarily tempted by despair, Sam recognizes the ultimate good of that struggle against the shadow and demonstrates the necessity of a real and intelligible telos or right end” (103). Motivated by great love, and not just for Frodo, Sam takes up the burden of the Ring, because he knows that to do otherwise puts everything in danger. Love for others is ultimately what saves Sam. In thinking about others first, he puts aside the selfish desire for escape and moves on.

While Sam has only a brief moment of doubt in which he must contend with intrusive, dark thoughts, Eowyn’s desire for death is both less obvious and more protracted through the story. Contrary to Lockerd’s assertion that there are “only two instances of suicide ideation in *The Lord of the Rings* (103), or to the impulse that many readers have to view Eowyn’s ride south as an exemplar of heroic courage, her decision is openly based on a desire for escape through death. When Theoden musters the Rohirim, he places Eowyn in charge because “she is fearless and high-hearted. All love her” (523). Rather than accepting this as the honor that it is intended to be, Eowyn seeks out Aragorn, hoping to join him on his journey, but he reminds her of the duty that has been placed upon her. Eowyn retorts, “Too often have I heard of duty,” before asking “may I not now

spend my life as I wish?” (784). After accusing Aragorn of wanting to leave her behind simply because she is a woman, he asks her what she fears, to which Eowyn responds, “A cage . . . to stay behind bars until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond desire or recall” (784). Eowyn has, in effect, embraced a pagan warrior ethos, one that holds that the greatest of all glory is to do great deeds and meet death on the battlefield. It is an expressly pre-Christian ideal then that drives her southward, disguised as Dernholm. To some extent, she seeks glory and valor on the battlefield, but more importantly, she seeks oblivion, the same escape that Denethor dreams of. Even the phrasing she employs, “spend my life,” hints at the fact she intends to use up her life.

Eowyn is spared from the fate she seemingly chases because of a change of purpose. In her fight with the Witch-King of Angmar, greatest of all the Ringwraiths, she puts aside her own desire for glory and a valiant death, and instead focuses on protecting someone she loves, King Theoden. Even in the face of the Witch-King’s threat that “he will not slay thee in thy turn. He will bear thee away to the houses of lamentation, beyond darkness, where thy flesh shall be devoured, and thy shriveled mind be left naked to the Lidless Eye,” she does not back down (841). Instead, she vows, “living or dark undead, I will smite you if you touch him” (841). What saves Eowyn in this moment is not her own actions, for as a mortal being, she has no chance on her own of slaying the Lord of the Nazgul. Instead, it is a eucatastrophe.¹⁰ It is Merry, armed with an ancient blade of

¹⁰ Eucatastrophe being Tolkien’s term for a sudden, unexpected reversal of fortunes to the better. It is something providential, for, as he explains, “in the ‘Eucatastrophe’ we see in a brief vision that the answer may be greater—it may be a far-off gleam or echo of evangelium [Christ’s message] in the real world” (“On Fairy Stories” 23).

Angmar, striking unexpectedly, that gives her the opening needed. But both Eowyn and Merry are gravely wounded in the ordeal. They both should have perished in the attempt, and yet Tolkien seems to be suggesting that it is the purity of their intentions that spares them. Each of them strikes, not to save themselves, but to protect the lives of others. More importantly, Eowyn is saved from an ignoble death because she acts out of love. Had she simply challenged the Nazgul for her own personal glory-seeking, her death might have been seen as heroic in a pagan sense, but it would have been both a wasted life and a dereliction of her duty.¹¹

Just as Tolkien offers examples of characters who escape an ignoble death because they choose to act out of love, he provides examples of those characters whose deaths are tied to their own selfish desires. Grima Wormtongue, for example, is driven by greed and lust. Gandalf, in his wisdom, rightly guesses that Saruman has bought Wormtongue's loyalty: "What was the promised price? When all the men were dead, you were to pick your share of the treasure, and take the woman you desire?" (520). Even once he has been made aware of these things, Theoden offers Wormtongue a chance for redemption, a chance to prove his loyalty. To do so, Grima must take up arms and ride to what might be his death. Unable to face such a prospect, Grima runs to Saruman instead, and his fate becomes inextricably tied to that of the wizard. Worse still, the text suggests that Grima's fear of death leads him to utter debasement. He complains that he is "always cursed and beaten," but when Gandalf suggests that he should abandon Saruman, he still

¹¹ Although it lies outside the scope of this essay, there is much more to be said about Eowyn and how she is saved, on three separate occasions, by love. Eowyn even expressly rejects the Germanic warrior ethos in favor of becoming a healer, which is about as close to a conversion experience as is likely to be found in *The Lord of the Rings*.

cannot find the courage to do so (983). Worse than the abuse, however, is the possibility that Saruman raises, that Wormtongue has resorted to cannibalism. In telling the hobbits of the Shire what happened to their mayor, Saruman says that Wormtongue killed him and “buried him, I hope: though Worm has been very hungry lately” (1020). Grima does not counter Saruman’s assertion. Instead, he simply says he was ordered to do so, leaving open the possibility that he really has resorted to the unthinkable. Pushed to the brink, he slits Saruman’s throat and is promptly felled by hobbit archers. Had he made a heroic stand against Saruman to protect the hobbits, he too might have been redeemed, but instead, he is driven by rage at being kicked one too many times. He acts purely out of instinct, which suggests that the constant abuse he has suffered has rendered him something less than human, as the name Wormtongue suggests. Despite numerous instances where he could be redeemed or at least escape from his situation, he lacks both courage and moral fortitude, and his death serves as one of Tolkien’s reminders of what a life lived only for self means.

Considered in the context of his intended role in Middle-Earth, Saruman presents an even more pointed lesson about the dangers of self-interest and pride leading to a contemptible death. Like Gandalf, Saruman is one of the Istari, a near-angelic being whose mission was to aid the Free People of Middle-Earth in their struggle against Sauron, but whereas Gandalf remains true to that purpose, Saruman yields to the temptations of power. Nicholas Birns suggests that from the very beginning, Saruman has a tendency towards following his own inclinations as opposed to the path put before him: “Saruman has already violated the implied instructions to the Istari to circulate and be helpful to all by claiming a specific place, Orthanc, as his own “(89). At Orthanc,

Saruman installs himself like a lord of old, but his failure in keeping to his purpose goes even further. As Jay Ruud points out, the Istari are charged with the task of convincing “the various folk of Middle-earth that they are better off resisting the power of the Dark Lord than submitting to his sovereignty” (144). Rather than arguing against Sauron’s dominion, Saruman suggests to Gandalf that the wise thing to do would be to join with the Dark Lord and then sway him towards more benevolent actions, or else use the One Ring to overthrow him and thus install themselves as the rulers of Middle-Earth. In forgetting his true purpose, he has, as Gandalf puts it, “left the path of wisdom” (258). What he offers instead seems to be a sort of jaded pragmatism. Believing that it is unlikely that Sauron can be defeated, he counsels it would be wiser to join with him, but this rhetoric conceals his true purpose—his own self-serving need for power. Gandalf reveals that Saruman was always the most interested in the Rings of Power but hoards this knowledge for his own purposes, and even boastfully calls himself “Saruman Ring-maker” (258). He clearly wants to possess a ring, preferably the One Ring, which highlights his lust for power, and as Carol Fry points out, the “desire for power is the core element of evil in Arda” (87).¹² The power that the Ring offers is the power of dominion over others. It is the ability to deprive others of free will, the very basis of moral decision making.

After Gandalf’s return as Gandalf the White, he breaks Saruman’s staff, divesting the wizard of the greater part of his power, but rather than turning away from evil, Saruman only sinks further into his debasement. Out of spite, Saruman and Wormtongue

¹² Tolkien’s term for Creation, of which Middle-Earth is part.

travel to the Shire, where they all but destroy the once idyllic home of the hobbits. When the hobbits arrive to see what has become of the Shire, Saruman even attempts to murder Frodo. Frodo, having suffered much, forgives him, saying “he is fallen, and his cure is beyond us; but I would still spare him, in the hope that he may find it” (1019). Birns argues that Saruman spurns the “last genuine offer of the victors for forgiveness” at Orthanc (88). In contrast, Richard Bergen claims that in the Shire, “Saruman is granted forgiveness” (117), but in the context of the novel, that reading is hard to justify. For one thing, what Frodo offers is mercy, not forgiveness. In saying that Saruman’s cure is beyond them, he even suggests that no mortal being *can* forgive Saruman, so great are his sins, and what follows immediately after only seems to reinforce this point. After Grima slays Saruman, the hobbits notice that all about the body, “a grey mist gathered, and rising slowly to a great height like smoke from a fire, as a pale shrouded figure it loomed over the Hill. For a moment it wavered, looking to the West” (1020). That the spirit looks to the West is important. As a Maia, an immortal being, Saruman might have the expectation that he will be taken back into the West where he could potentially be allowed to regain his form and receive forgiveness.¹³ It is possible that, at the moment of his doom, he realizes his mistake and looks to the Valar in hopes of salvation. Instead, “from the West came a cold wind, and it [Saruman’s spirit] bent away, and with a sigh dissolved into nothing” (1020). Rather than being accepted back into the West, Saruman is utterly annihilated, and, as if to make the point even clearer, when the hobbits look to Saruman’s body, where they see “that the long years of death were suddenly revealed in

¹³ After all, the Valar had previously offered Sauron, also a maia, forgiveness after the Siege of Angband, as detailed in *The Silmarillion*.

it, and it shrank, and the shriveled face became rags of skin upon a hideous skull” (1020). His death is utter and complete, in part because he is the antithesis of Gandalf. There is no hope that he will return because he has not kept faith, and thus, Tolkien offers a less than subtle reminder that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23, *New American Standard*). With Saruman’s demise, Tolkien also invokes some decidedly gothic imagery. The grisly reminder that we are all just “rags of flesh” stretched over bone invokes what Julia Kristeva terms abjection. That Tolkien would choose to connect these images so closely to a character who manifests such moral failing within the text only serves to reinforce the breakdown of the correct, moral order of things. Instead of keeping to his purpose, Saruman rebels in a satanic sense, turning against the will of all Authority. Not only does Saruman serve as an example of a bad death, but he is also a reminder to be vigilant against self-serving temptations.

Tolkien’s use of grotesque imagery is pervasive throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, but it is perhaps most apparent with the character of Gollum, whose death, despite serving providence, is due to his own failings. Despite Gandalf’s revelation that Smeagol had once been “of hobbit-kind,” he is greatly changed by his long possession of the Ring (52). Admittedly, Tolkien is somewhat elusive in describing Gollum’s physical appearance. In the prologue to *The Lord of the Rings*, he states that “he was a loathsome little creature . . . with pale luminous eyes” and that “he ate any living thing, even orc, if he could catch it and strangle it without a struggle” (4). Sam describes him as having “paddle-feet, like a swan’s almost, only they seemed bigger” (382) and he mistakes Gollum’s eyes for two lamps moving along the shore. Likewise, Gollum’s hair is described as “thin and lank” (602), matching the description of his body. In contrast,

Tolkien is very clear about Gollum's moral character. While Tolkien suggests that there is something almost pitiable about Gollum (he even has Gandalf praise Bilbo's pity in sparing him), he argues that Gollum nonetheless "ended in persistent wickedness" ("To Michael Straight" 234). Though the Smeagol part of Gollum seems to crave Frodo's love and attention, there is too little good left in him. For too long, he has possessed the Ring, and those long years have altered him, both physically and spiritually. Jealousy festers in him like a cancer. All that remains is his persistent longing for the Ring, and if anything, the loss of the ring drives him to even worse acts of evil: "The Woodsmen said that there was some new terror abroad, a ghost that drank blood. It climbed trees to find nests; it crept into holes to find the young; it slipped through windows to find cradles" (*The Lord of the Rings* 58). Not only does Tolkien invoke the imagery of the vampire, he does so in a way that emphasizes just how deplorable Gollum has become. He preys on the weakest, the most helpless, the most innocent. He is made monstrous by his actions, and thus horrifying, and yet the greatest horror seems to be in the reminder that he was once hobbit-kin, little different than Frodo.

Even though the influence of the One Ring on Gollum is indeed immense, Tolkien is very clear that it is Gollum's own actions that bring about both his initial fall into evil and his final fall into the Crack of Doom. In relating the history of the Ring, Gandalf tells Frodo the story of Deagol and Smeagol. Of the two, Deagol is the one who actually finds the Ring, when he is pulled into the river and recovers it from the riverbed. Smeagol demands the Ring for a birthday present, and when Deagol refuses, Smeagol "strangled him, because the gold looked so bright and beautiful" (53). Quite the contrary to what David Callaway suggests in his essay "Gollum: A Misunderstood Hero," that

“Gollum is not more evil in the beginning than either Frodo or Bilbo, he is just controlled by the Ring for a longer period of time” (17); Gollum is willing to murder his friend simply out of greed. He is not yet ensnared by the Ring’s power, but by his own evil, a point that Tolkien himself makes quite clear when he writes that Gollum “would never have had to endure it [the domination of the Ring] if he had not become a mean sort of thief before it crossed his path” (“To Michael Straight” 234-35). The suggestion then is that the failures in Smeagol’s character are already present, and honestly, the speed with which he moves to murder Deagol for a trinket whose value is yet unknown suggests a predisposition towards violence. Thus, Emma Hawkin’s assertion that the One Ring is “the source of Gollum’s crimes and ruination” (35) does not align with what Tolkien intended. While there is no doubt that, as Gandalf points out, Smeagol uses the Ring “to find out secrets and put the knowledge to crooked and malicious uses,” nothing suggests that the Ring forces him to do so (53). From the very beginning, he is shown making horrifically immoral choices. Tolkien argues that “whatever our beliefs, we have to face the facts that there are persons who yield to temptation, reject their chances of nobility or salvation, and appear to be damnable” (“To Michael Straight” 234). What is important to note is how Tolkien phrases his assessment of damnation. It is not some predetermined quality, but rather the actions of the individual, the refusal to accept salvation when it is offered. As Craig Boyd points out, “the charity that Frodo habitually offers throughout the journey cannot overcome Gollum’s own intransigent vice” (90). Nothing Frodo attempts will be enough to rescue Smeagol because he ultimately does not want to be rescued. He simply wants his Precious returned to him, which is what he gets, in the end. While Frodo credits him with the destruction of the Ring, accomplishing what he himself

could not do, Tolkien is unambivalent on his opinion regarding this contribution, stating that “the fact that this worked good was no credit to him” (“To Michael Straight” 234). His death comes at a moment of his own elation, having finally been restored with his Precious by savagely biting off Frodo’s finger, and even as he falls into the fires of Mount Doom, “out of the depths came his last wail *Precious*, and he was gone” (948). In his final moments, his thoughts are still consumed with the Ring. Perhaps this is what leads Amendt-Raduege to conclude that Gollum’s death “works as a caution against the dangers of covetousness” (39). While she is correct in that it serves that purpose, Tolkien also uses his death to highlight the dangers of living selfishly.¹⁴ Gollum’s every thought is for himself, not others, which is the ultimate source of his damnation.

In Gollum, Tolkien also seems to be exploring the dangers of an unnaturally long life. Much of Smeagol’s physical deterioration into Gollum is caused by his protracted sojourn in the depths of the Misty Mountains, where his body alters to its environs. Not only does his transformation render him unrecognizable as something hobbit-kin, but it also renders him as the uncanny Other, in a Freudian sense. No longer appearing like a hobbit, he nonetheless “is revealed to be the intimate—inextricably bound up with our notion of self” (Sandner 162). Frodo sees in Gollum the possibility of redemption, the “hope of a cure,” as Gandalf terms it (56). At the same time, Gollum’s very habits, such as his preference for eating animals raw, serve to alienate him to Sam. He is that part of our own temperament that we must find abjectable, to borrow from Kristeva. Within the story, characters are repulsed by his appearance, but Tolkien’s intention seems to be that

¹⁴ Tolkien does not seem to be aware of Ayn Rand’s Objectivist philosophy, but Gollum could easily be read as a rejection of her belief in “ethical selfishness.”

we should find his actions far more reprehensible. For Gollum, the outward self is a reflection of the inner reality. His body is warped and twisted because his soul has become warped and twisted. Tolkien does not, however, suggest that Frodo's pity is misplaced, and arguably, it is only because Frodo shows him mercy that the destruction of the Ring comes to pass.

Saruman is an immortal being by his very nature, and while Gollum does not deliberately seek out an unnaturally long life, there is a group of mortals in *The Lord of the Rings* who are ensnared by their selfish desire for immortality—the Nazgul. From the moment that the Black Riders are first introduced into the story, there is decidedly something unnatural about them:

Around the corner came a black horse, no hobbit-pony but a full-sized horse; and on it sat a large man, who seemed to crouch in the saddle, wrapped in a great black cloak and hood, so that only his boots in the high stirrups showed below; his face was shadowed and invisible.

When it reached the tree and was level with Frodo the horse stopped. The riding figure sat quite still with its head bowed, as if listening. From inside the hood came a noise as of someone sniffing to catch an elusive scent; the head turned from side to side of the road. (74)

Eventually, they are revealed to be Ringwraiths, the nine “Mortal Men doomed to die” (50). According to Gandalf, they were given rings in exchange for their allegiance to Sauron, but the gift proved to be a snare, and they became “shadows under his great Shadow, his most terrible servants” (51). Tolkien frames their choice somewhat curiously. In his essay “On Fairy Stories,” Tolkien acknowledges what he terms “the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death” (22). With the Ringwraiths, he highlights just how dangerous that desire can be. Linda Greenwood points out that “in his myth the ‘gift of death’ is given to Men. Their rejection of this ‘divine gift,’ their desire to

escape from death, ensnares them in the power of Sauron” (185). Not only are they bound to his will, like Gollum, they are transformed by the power of the Ring. They become creatures of darkness—the undead.

As the use of the term “wraith” suggests, they are no longer living beings, but neither are they truly dead. They are perpetually caught in a liminal state, their entire existence bound to the Ring, which would seem to be a fate worse than death. Strangely, though, surprisingly little critical attention has been given to the Ringwraiths. Amendt-Raduege makes only passing mention of them in her work, despite focusing extensively on the ghosts of Dunharrow, and in many cases, the only reference to them can be found in relation to Eowyn and Merry’s defeat of their captain.¹⁵ Jon Harvey somewhat reductively suggest that they are a lingering vestige of the Wild Hunt in English literature, but Josh Woods’s essay “Ring-wraiths and Dracula” provides numerous interesting points of comparison between the Black Riders and vampires, such as their disdain for sunlight, the inability to cross running water, and even the ways in which the Morgol blade seems to mimic the bite of the vampire. Woods argues that Tolkien seems to confirm their somewhat vampiric qualities through Aragorn, who reveals “at all times they smell the blood of living things, desiring and hating it” (*Lord of the Rings* 189). Woods may be misinterpreting this passage, however. Rather than thirsting for blood, as he suggests, it is possible that Tolkien is alluding to the notion that blood is source of life.

¹⁵ In “Parallel Paths and Distorting Mirrors: Strategic Duality as a Narrative Principle in Tolkien’s Works.” Michaela Hausmann contrasts the defeat of Fingolfin at the hands of Melkor with Eowyn’s triumph over the Witch-king. Interestingly, she makes no mention whatsoever of Merry’s involvement. Verlyn Flieger, on the other hand, only makes a brief reference to the fight in “Defying and Defining Darkness, though she at least credits Merry for helping.

Having been deceived by Sauron, they lust for life, unable to have it any longer, and hate those who do have it. They have, to use Tolkien's terminology, "confused immortality with limitless serial longevity. . . The *confusion* is the work of the Enemy, and one of the chief causes of human disaster" ("From a letter to C. Ouboter" 267). To make the point somewhat clearer, Tolkien suggests comparing "the death of Aragorn with a Ringwraith" ("From a letter to C. Ouboter" 267). Aragorn is blessed with longevity greater than most men but far less than the elves, but when the time comes, he embraces death without hesitation (as we are shown in the Appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*). The Ringwraiths, fearing death, are doomed to neither live nor die until the destruction of the One Ring. With the Ring's destruction, Tolkien states that they are "caught in the fiery ruing of hill and sky; they crackled, withered, and went out" (947). Physically destroyed, their true fate is still left ambiguous. Are they utterly destroyed like Saruman, do they become enervated spirits without the ability to act,¹⁶ or do they pass on finally, into true death beyond Middle-Earth? Tolkien does not say, but they serve, nonetheless, as horrific reminders of what it means to chase after deathlessness out of a fear of death, becoming servants of unspeakable evil in the process.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien establishes a paradigm for how fantasy literature can engage with ideas of death and deathlessness. Colin Manlove argues that in Tolkien's writing, "the impulse is on the whole nostalgia for a world simpler, less populated, better ordered and more natural than the writer's own" (93). Tolkien, however, shows us that

¹⁶ Tolkien reveals in a letter to Mrs. Eileen Elgar that the Witch-king was not destroyed by Eowyn and Merry, but he was "reduced to impotence" (331).

Middle-Earth is fraught with chaos and danger. It is not a simpler world nor is it more natural and more ordered. Instead, the very natural order can and is violated by those who should have greater wisdom. While supernatural good and evil reside in Tolkien's secondary creation, they are not all powerful nor are they absolutes. Instead, good and evil reside in the choices that are made. Phillip Martin similarly points to an "anti-modern philosophy" running throughout Tolkien's work (16). Here, at least, the charge is more accurate, in that Tolkien is rejecting the philosophies of Nietzsche and Rand, those philosophies that foreground self-interest over social obligations. In this also, Tolkien establishes the pattern that will be followed, for he is not simply rejecting the trappings of modernity, he is fighting against a prevalent attitude that, even now, grows more pervasive. As we will see in the coming chapters, Rowling employs the same strategies as Tolkien to establish a heroic ethos centered in Christian ideals of love and rejecting the quest for deathlessness. Like Tolkien, her works also serve as a contemporary handbook on how to die well.

CHAPTER TWO: GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN: HARRY'S EXEMPLARS IN FACING DEATH

While the exploration of death and deathlessness in *The Lord of the Rings* is often subtly explored in the text, J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series foregrounds these themes from the very beginning, making one man's obsessive quest to avoid a natural death the main driver of the plot. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*,¹⁷ the first of the seven book series, opens with the death of Harry's parents and the failure of Lord Voldemort to achieve his long sought goal of immortality. Though Harry, like the reader, remains ignorant for much of the series as to why Voldemort murdered his parents and how their deaths are connected to his desire for deathlessness, death and the pursuit of immortality appear as themes in the very first novel. With each subsequent novel, Rowling builds upon her ideas, and as such, the Harry Potter series, like *The Lord of the Rings* before it, serves a similar function as an *ars moriendi*, by providing examples of good deaths to the reader. This chapter will focus on the ways that Rowling develops a metacontextual exploration of what it means to die well, for the many examples of good deaths provided in the series are not simply intended to serve as didactic reminders of Rowling's central message, they also function to provide Harry with moral edification, helping to serve as models that he will emulate by the end of the series. More importantly, Rowling's exemplars in facing death show that how we die is a matter of character and ethics, for their deaths are rendered meaningful because they accept death. They make willing

¹⁷ Though my own personal preference is for the British Title *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, I have used the US title throughout this work because the quotes I have pulled are from the US editions.

sacrifices of themselves for the common good because they are motivated by love and not solely their own self-interest.

Considerable critical discourse has been devoted to the theme of death in the Harry Potter series, often in an ethical context. Luke Bell, John Killinger, and John Granger have explicitly tied the theme of death to Biblical teachings, but many other critics also have acknowledged that Christianity informs Rowling's views, despite some initial fears that her worldview might reflect paganism or witchcraft. In *The Wisdom of Harry Potter*, Edmund Kern suggest that Rowling establishes a view of death that, while rooted in Christianity, also reflects a Stoic theme in advocating "for patience, diligence, and sacrifice in the name of greater goods" (37). Similarly, Andrea Stojilkov argues in "Life(and)death in 'Harry Potter': The Immortality of Love and Soul," that while "Christianity directly influenced Rowling," her views of death and immortality are no less relevant to Judaism, Islam, or Buddhism. Fraser Los, on the other hand, approaches the Harry Potter books from a purely humanistic perspective, but he nonetheless concludes that the series positions death in terms of moral choices made on the part of the two main characters. Nicole Jowsey takes an entirely existentialist approach to death in the Harry Potter series, using Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* as a lens for examining how Harry comes to accept death.

Numerous critics explore the deaths in Harry Potter as examining extant cultural concerns or fears. For example, Breanna Mroczek argues that the books remain so popular due in part to the ways in which they humanize death, but also because they emphasize that "our relationships with others benefit from being based on life and love

rather than on life or death” (68). Likewise, in “Controversial Content: Is Harry Potter Harmful to Children,” Deborah Taub and Heather Severtay-Seib point out that “Rowling’s representation of child and adolescent grief are accurate and insightful” (24). On the other hand, Christina Hitchcock examines the books in the context of Western cultural concerns about death, while Anna Mackenzie examines the books more from an individual perspective of fearing death. Nicholas Wandinger and Jeffrey Williams explore the novels in the context of sacrifice, but while Wandinger concludes that Rowling positions sacrifice as an act of “self-giving love” (47), Williams is less optimistic in his reading, and instead, sees Rowling as participating in a form of child sacrifice necessary to maintain the status quo. Williams is not alone in being somewhat skeptical towards Rowling’s portrayals of death. Perhaps the most scathing condemnation of Rowling’s work and how it represents death comes from Dina Khapaeva’s *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture*. Khapaeva argues, essentially, that Western culture is too accepting of death. Khapaeva points to the massive popularity of the Harry Potter series as proof of her position, and rather than accepting the text as a genuinely positive portrayal of a healthy acceptance of death, Khapaeva interprets the novel to be a convoluted linguistic joke on Rowling’s part, claiming that “this is a story about a progressive mental disease that drives the protagonist to a profound insanity and finally leads him to commit suicide, all the while imagining himself in a duel to the death with the omnipotent Voldemort” (158). Given that Rowling is writing fantasy, and from an expressly Christian perspective, this reading is problematic, at best.¹⁸

¹⁸ Much of it is predicated on the supposition that Rowling wants us to read Tom Riddle’s name as a clue to the fact that he is not real, but instead “a word puzzle” to be solved (150). To be quite blunt, though, the

Throughout the Harry Potter series, the Boy Who Lived loses many of the most important figures in his life, and their deaths serve as poignant, often painful, lessons on how to live and die well. Of all the deaths in the series, none are perhaps more important than that of his parents, Lily and James Potter. In many ways, their deaths set the plot of the novels in motion, for it is with Lily's sacrificial death that Harry gains the protection needed to survive the Killing Curse, and yet, Harry will not learn that particular piece of information until the end of his first year at Hogwarts. To some extent, this is because of the way the novels are structured, but Rowling's choice to delay revelation of important information until later in the novels, and indeed the series as a whole, owes to the fact that she is often borrowing from multiple different genres. As Anne Alton points out in "Playing the Genre Game," Rowling pulls elements from "mystery, gothic and horror stories, detective fiction, the school story, and the closely related sports story," as well as from "fantasy, adventure, and quest romance" (199-200). Rowling borrows *heavily* from detective fiction,¹⁹ particularly in the first three books of the series, but even in *Goblet of Fire*, *Order of the Phoenix*, and *Half-Blood Prince*, those elements are very much present.

Likewise, Rowling uses tropes common to narrative forms now commonly associated with children: fairy tales. Given the overt nods to fairy tale traditions, particularly in the first book, it is somewhat unsurprising that there have been numerous critical examinations of the Harry Potter series in this context. For example, both Elaine Ostry and M. Katherine Grimes have made the connection between the death of Harry's

entire argument reads as if Khapaeva is mocking the series rather than attempting to make a good-faith argument.

¹⁹ In many ways, the books read more like detective fiction with a thin veneer of magic than fantasy stories with a heavy dose of detective fiction.

parents and fairy tale tropes. Ostry contends that Harry is akin to Cinderella in the Grimm's tale, as "he is magically protected by the love of his dead mother" (98). For Grimes, however, the loss of parents, while central to both fairy tales and the Harry Potter series, functions for an entirely different reason: to deprive Harry of parental protection. In *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*, Maria Nikolajeva shies away from examining the text in terms of fairy tale tropes; nonetheless, she arrives at a point of agreement with Grimes, noting that "the removal of parents is the premise of children's literature. The absence of parental authority allows the space that the fictive child needs for development and maturity, to test (and taste) his independence and discover the world without adult protection" (16). Nikolajeva correctly points out that Harry is exposed to far greater dangers than he would be were his parents present, but she fails to account for the many ways in which Harry is actually hindered by the loss of his parents, such as being severed entirely from the magical world until his eleventh birthday and being all but imprisoned with the Dursleys each summer. As Roni Natov points out, Harry lacks the "safety net of many children who have loving parents and guardians" (125). As is so common in fairy tales, the protagonist is left in the care of someone who does not have his best interests at heart. Grimes notes that "Petunia Dursley is reminiscent of the evil stepmother in folk and fairy tales," noting that she is "willing to abandon the child entrusted to her care" and "overwhelmingly favors her biological child over her surrogate" (95).

In almost every sense, the Dursleys fit the motif of the abusive, wicked stepparents, for in attempting to keep Harry away from all things magical, the Dursleys completely cut him off from his heritage and do him psychological harm. They are, as

Mary Pharr states, “caricatures of cruelty” (52). While Harry lives with the Dursleys, he has nothing to connect him to his parents, not even photographs:

He’d lived with the Dursleys almost ten years, ten miserable years, as long as he could remember, ever since he’d been a baby and his parents had died in that car crash. He couldn’t remember being in the car when his parents had died. Sometimes, when he strained his memory during long hours in his cupboard, he came up with a strange vision: a blinding flash of green light and a burning pain on his forehead. This, he supposed, was the crash, though he couldn’t imagine where all the green light came from. Harry couldn’t remember his parents at all. His aunt and uncle never spoke about them, and of course, he was forbidden to ask questions. There were no photographs of them in the house. (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 29-30)

In other words, Harry is utterly deprived of knowledge about his parents not only visually but in every way possible. Until his eleventh birthday, when he is finally able to transition from his enforced mundane existence back into the world of his birthright, Harry has only one single repeated lie to sustain any curiosity he might have about his parents. Even though his Aunt Petunia is his mother’s biological sister, she shares no information about her with him—nothing about her appearance, her personality, her love for him—and Harry, forbidden from asking questions, cannot hope to gain even the most rudimentary knowledge to which most children would be privy. Despite Taub and Severtay-Seib’s suggestion that “Harry grieves the deaths of his parents even though they died before he knew them,” there is no evidence of grief displayed in the opening chapters of *Sorcerer’s Stone* (24). What Harry exhibits is a number of traits consistent with his loss and his treatment by the Dursleys. First, he seems to almost be in denial, which according to psychologist Atle Dyregrov, is quite common in grieving children: “There is a strong need to keep what has happened [the death of a parent] at a distance, and to let the event get closer gradually” (47). Dyregrov also notes that boys are less likely to outwardly

display their grief than girls, but he also emphasizes that it is important that adults maintain open and honest communication with the child who is experiencing loss. He asserts, for instance, “when facts are hidden, or the child is not properly informed about the circumstances and the cause of the death, fantasies may prevail” (77). Harry does seem somewhat prone to this, as, for instance, Rowling reveals that “when he had been younger, Harry had dreamed and dreamed of some unknown relation coming to take him away” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 29). Deprived of the truth and of love, Harry learns not to question and lives a bleak and isolated life, particularly for a ten year old.

In almost the same moment that Harry learns that he is a wizard, he also learns the truth about his parents’ deaths, that they were not, as he had been told, killed in a car crash, but instead died at the hands of Lord Voldemort, and Hagrid begins to frame their deaths in an ethical context for Harry. After revealing that Harry comes from a magical lineage and is thus a wizard himself, he proceeds to tell Harry the story of how his parents died, emphasizing that they were killed by a “wizard who went . . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 54). At the same time, he emphasizes that Harry’s parents were “as good a witch an’ wizard as I ever knew,” and that they wouldn’t “want anytin’ ter do with the Dark Side” (55). Vernon Dursley counters by saying that “they were weirdos, no denying it, and the world’s better off without them” (56). Likewise, in a moment of pique, Aunt Petunia lets slip that her sister “went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!” (53). Instead of mourning the loss of her sister, Petunia blames Lily for her own demise, and at the same time, she makes it abundantly clear to Harry that he is not welcome, wanted or loved in her

household.²⁰ In this moment, Harry is being offered two contrasting positions. Hagrid, Rowling notes, gives Harry a look filled with “warmth and respect” in relating the story about his parents (55). In contrast, all the Durselys have to offer is spite and bitterness.²¹ In *The Wisdom of Harry Potter*, Edmund Kern notes that Rowling “provides not only the promise of triumph over evil, but also guidance on how to meet it through thoughtful attention to right and wrong” (26). Harry, like the reader, is allowed the space to interpret these two versions of his parents. As Grimes points out, “the Dursleys are lowly in a moral way whereas the Weasleys and Hagrid, though perhaps of a lower socioeconomic class than Harry, are morally superior to many of the novel’s other characters” (92). Thus, when characters who are themselves prone to moral defects tend to speak unfavorably of the Potters, while those who are presented most favorably, like Hagrid, are the ones that hold them in most esteem, Harry (and the reader) interpret their positions in a moral context. Thus, for example, when Harry rejects Draco Malfoy’s offer of friendship, in no small part because of his overt snobbishness, Malfoy retorts “I’d be careful if I were you, Potter [. . .] Unless you’re a bit politer, you’ll go the same way as your parents. They didn’t know what was good for them either” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 109). Malfoy intends this as a slight. Rather than taking offense, however, Harry is reminded that he is acting as his parents would. He has made a moral choice, and Malfoy’s attempts to reproach him only

²⁰ Aunt Petunia serves as an anti-mother to Harry, forced into the role against her will. Instead of embracing him as a son and loving him, she sees him as a reminder of the sister who deserted her to go off to Hogwarts. Given what we learn in *Deathly Hallows*, she seems to choose Vernon because he so obviously rejects all things magical. Petunia wallows in spite, rather than allowing love to heal her. While she is not entirely without love--she does seem to genuinely care about Dudley--she comes very close to being one of those that Dumbledore suggests we should pity the most, “those who live without love” (722).

²¹ Diana Mertz Hsieh suggests that the Durselys’ life would be nothing short of hellish as Petunia would have to constantly fend off reminders of her life with Lily, pre-Hogwarts, while Vernon would live in constant fear of being outed as someone with ties to the magical world. See “Dursley’s Duplicity: The Morality and Psychology of Self-Deception.”

serve to highlight that this is the ethically correct choice. Rowling repeats this same pattern near the end of *Sorcerer's Stone*. During his encounter with Voldemort-Quirrel, he is told that that it would be “better [to] save your own life and join me . . . or you’ll meet the same end as your parents” (294). Harry is thus presented with his first, major meaningful choice of the series: whether to accept Voldemort’s offer and save his own life or, to do as his parents did, and risk death in defiance. Harry has already avowed that he will never go “over to the Dark Side,” in part because he understands that his parents died because they made an ethical choice (270). Although Dumbledore does not expressly comment on the importance of choices until *Chamber of Secrets*, that motif is present from the very first novel. For instance, when Dumbledore explains that “your mother died to save you. If there is one thing that Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn’t realize that love as powerful as your mother’s for you leaves its own mark,” the emphasis is on Lily’s choice to die on Harry’s behalf (299). As Voldemort himself points out, “your mother needn’t have died” (294). Lily could have spared herself, as later books make very clear. Instead, she chose to die and protect her son.²²

Having been provided only limited parcels of information about his parents, Harry forms an incomplete version of who they are, one that is defined initially only by their defiance of Lord Voldemort and the love of other people. Considering that Dumbledore’s carefully constructed plan to defeat Voldemort hinges on Harry’s willingness to die, this cannot be seen as accidental and goes a long way to explain why the wizard, who by his

²² In *Goblet of Fire*, Voldemort refers to her sacrifice as “an old magic,” which seems to be an allusion to Aslan’s sacrifice in C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (653). There, Aslan offers himself as a willing sacrifice to save Edmund from the White Witch. Obviously, Lily has a much more personal reason for her sacrifice.

own admission knew Harry's parents well, never seeks to fully humanize James and Lily. Instead, Dumbledore seems to consciously avoid telling Harry any other pertinent details about his parents. There are no amusing anecdotes about their adventures at school, nor are there any accounts of how much they loved Harry when he was an infant *except* in the context of their sacrifice. Thus, James and Lily are cast as martyrs in the war against Voldemort, beatified by their actions and serving as saintly role models for their son. Harry is not allowed to connect to them as people. Instead, their narrative functions much in the same way as the stories of saints' lives in the middle ages: as a story that reinforces theological principles and acts as a guide for how to live (and die). In her article "Harry Potter and the Legends of Saints," M. Wendy Hennequin argues that "abilities, tropes, and even plot structures in the Harry Potter series clearly derive from medieval saints' lives and the cult of saints" (67). Hennequin focuses primarily on Harry, and in particular, on his encounter with the Basilisk in *Chamber of Secrets* as Rowling's retelling of St. George slaying the dragon and considers Neville's slaying of Nagini in *Deathly Hallows* to be a reiteration on that theme. Hennequin does, however, note that martyrdom plays heavily into Rowling's work: "Harry and Neville, on the other hand, willingly accept death as the possible price of thwarting Voldemort and therefore are constructed as brave, steadfast, and chivalrous" (76). Despite her focus on Harry, Hennequin does briefly touch on the importance Lily's death and how it is explicitly connected to the miraculous power of love, specifically to "conquer suffering and death by suffering and dying" (77). Lily loves her son so much that she willingly gives her life for him, and in doing so, serves as his exemplar. Lily loves her son so much that she hurls herself into the path of the most dangerous dark wizard of all time, knowing full well that there is no protection from the

Killing Curse. However desperate the act might have been, it proves to be successful, because—and the novels are quite adamant on this point—she loved Harry. Dumbledore attests to the enduring power of love when he explains, “your mother died to save you . . . to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 299). As in the Christian tradition, love can overwhelm and overpower death, and Lily, “like a saint . . . wields more power after her martyrdom” (Hennequin 77). The love that she has for Harry in life bestows on him a protection against evil that transcends her death.

Lily’s death is framed as one of the most noble deaths in the Harry Potter series, because it is an act of love. Not only does Rowling provide her death as an exemplar for her readers, it serves as a model for Harry as well, a point that Dumbledore frequently emphasizes. Here, we have to address the fact that Dumbledore has an ulterior motive. To bring about Voldemort’s final defeat, he needs Harry to be willing to die when the time comes, so his emphasis on his mother’s sacrifice may be an attempt to goad Harry into emulating her actions. Dumbledore is not above manipulation, particularly when he believes it will serve the greater good, and it is obvious that he perceives Voldemort’s demise as essential. While the prophecy that seemingly links Harry to Voldemort says that “he will have power the Dark Lord knows not,” it is Dumbledore who interprets this to mean the ability to love (*Order of the Phoenix* 841). For quite some time, Harry fails to appreciate this power for himself. When, at long last, Dumbledore and Harry make the full discovery of just how mangled Voldemort’s soul has become and what will be necessary in order to bring about his defeat, Harry becomes somewhat annoyed at his mentor’s continued insistence that he possesses “a power that Voldemort has never had”

(*Half-Blood Prince* 509), feeling that the ability to love is hardly worth noting.

Dumbledore counters, saying “Yes, Harry, you can love [. . .] which given everything that has happened to you, is a great and remarkable thing. You are still too young to understand how unusual you are” (509). What Dumbledore does not reveal at this time is that he fully expects that Harry will absorb the lessons provided, emulate the model of his mother, and offer himself just as willingly as a sacrifice. On that point, Rowling herself seems to be making a particular emphasis. Harry must make a conscious *choice* to die in order to generate the same protective magic that his mother’s death does.

While James Potter is positioned as a model worthy of Harry’s emulation, particularly in terms of his heroism and courage, his death is emphasized far less than Lily’s. Julie Breton’s exploration of maternal figures in the works of T. H. White and J. K. Rowling foregrounds this disparity. Breton points out that “the death of the mother, fully considered in itself, is directly associated with the double notions of love and protection by her sacrifice” (106). Why then would a father’s love and sacrifice not provide the same protections? In an interview with *The Leaky Cauldron* in 2005, Rowling herself addressed this point:

Don't you want to ask me why James's death didn't protect Lily and Harry? There's your answer, you've just answered your own question, because she could have lived and chose to die. James was going to be killed anyway. Do you see what I mean? I'm not saying James wasn't ready to; he died trying to protect his family, but he was going to be murdered anyway. He had no -- he wasn't given a choice, so he rushed into it in a kind of animal way, I think there are distinctions in courage. James was immensely brave. But the caliber of Lily's bravery was, I think in this instance, higher because she could have saved herself. Now any mother, any normal mother would have done what Lily did. So, in that sense her courage too was of an animal quality, but she was given time to choose. James wasn't.

James shows courage in facing Lord Voldemort, but according to Rowling, the distinction is that Lily consciously and deliberately chooses to sacrifice herself for her infant son.²³ Rowling's answer explains not only why Lily's death is seen as more impactful, it is the one that Dumbledore chooses to emphasize, far more than that of Harry's father. Chellyce Birch, interpreting Lily's death in a Biblical context, argues that this "act of love bears a similarity to the Judgement of Solomon, in which a mother sacrifices her claim to her son to save his life" (10). Like his mother, Harry will have to willingly choose to die when other alternatives present themselves.

Like Lily, James serves as a role model for Harry to emulate. He too becomes a martyred saint, but whereas it is Lily's love that Dumbledore stresses so much, it is James's heroism and courage that are most lauded. As for Harry himself, he seems to be more prone to wanting to emulate his father, partly because, as he is so often reminded, he looks the most like James. Harry, however, lacks any firsthand knowledge about his father, so the version that he creates for himself is a romanticized ideal. To some extent, this is probably due to the way that his mentor figures relate James to Harry. For example, Mary Pharr points out that "When his friend Hagrid wants to compliment Harry on his heroism, he tells the boy that Harry has done just what his father would have done" (55). The first time that Dumbledore and Harry discuss James Potter, Dumbledore points to his heroism, noting that the reason Snape disliked James was because James saved his life. Even Lord Voldemort, admits that James was brave and that "he put up a courageous

²³ What this means is that, however unlikely it seems, Voldemort was willing to spare Lily because Snape had asked him to do so. When he tells Harry that she did not have to die, he apparently meant it, which seems incongruous for his character.

fight” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 294). The one person who ever attempts to dispel Harry’s conception of his father as a hero is Severus Snape, such as when he taunts Harry’s admiration of his father in *Prisoner of Azkaban*:

Have you been imagining some act of glorious heroism? Then let me correct you—your saintly father and his friends played a highly amusing joke on me that would have resulted in my death if your father hadn’t got cold feet at the last moment. There was nothing brave about what he did. He was saving his own skin as much as mine. (285)

For the first time, Harry realizes that he truly doesn’t know what his father was like, so he turns to Professor Lupin, who was both James’s friend and a professor for whom Harry has immense respect. Lupin immediately contradicts Snape’s version of the story. In the account he provides, Sirius Black lets slip that Lupin sneaked off to the Shrieking Shack once a month. Black’s goal was to put Snape in mortal danger, given that Lupin was transformed into a werewolf at the time, but Lupin tells Harry that “your father, who’d heard what Sirius had done, went after Snape and pulled him back, at great risk of life” (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 357). Reassured by Lupin’s words, Harry returns to viewing his father primarily as an idealized hero because that is the version that has been constructed for him. In part, this accounts for his “great weakness for heroics” (*Order of the Phoenix* 782), which is recognized by everyone from Arthur Weasley, who worries what Harry might do when he learns about Sirius Black’s believed involvement in the death of Harry’s parents in *Prisoner of Azkaban*, to Lucius Malfoy, who mocks the tendency when Harry comes charging into the Ministry of Magic intent on rescuing his godfather, in *Order of the Phoenix*.

Harry conceptualizes his father as a heroic ideal because he never had the chance to know him as a man, and given the lack of details he is provided throughout his early childhood, this is hardly surprising. As he transitions into the magical world, though, he gains the ability to have limited interactions with his parents. For Christmas his first year at Hogwarts, Harry receives his Invisibility Cloak from Dumbledore.²⁴ Not long after, he discovers the Mirror of Erised. Looking into the mirror for the first time, he is somewhat confused by what he sees:

There he was, reflected in it, white and scared-looking, and there, reflected behind him, were at least ten others. Or were they all invisible too? Was he in fact in a room full of invisible people that this mirror's trick was that it reflected them, invisible or not?

He looked in the mirror again. A woman standing right behind his reflection was smiling at him and waving. He reached out a hand and felt the air behind him. If she was really there, he'd touch her, their reflections were so close together, but he felt only air—she and the others existed only in the mirror.

She was a very pretty woman. She had dark red hair and her eyes—*her eyes are just like mine*, Harry thought, edging a little closer to the glass. Bright green—exactly the same shape, but then he noticed that she was crying; smiling but crying at the same time. The tall, thin, black-haired man standing next to her put his arm around her. He wore glasses, and his hair was very untidy. It stuck up at the back, just as Harry's did.

Harry was so close to the mirror now that his nose was nearly touching that of his reflection.

“Mum?” he whispered “Dad?”

They just looked at him, smiling. And slowly, Harry looked into the faces of the other people in the mirror, and saw other pairs of green eyes like his, other noses like his, even a little old man who looked as though he had Harry's knobby knees—Harry was looking at his family, for the first time in his life.

The Potters smiled and waved at Harry and he stared hungrily back at them his hands pressed flat against the glass as though he was hoping to fall right through it and reach them. He had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness. (*Sorcerer's Stone* 208-209)

²⁴ Initially, Harry has no idea who gifts him the cloak at first, since Dumbledore doesn't sign the card.

For the first time in his life, Harry actually sees his parents,²⁵ and given the lack of pictures at the Dursleys' house, his initial inability to recognize them is not surprising. When Harry views them in the mirror, they are simply present, there to smile and wave, or in the case of his mother, to shed tears.²⁵ Dumbledore, in explaining how the Mirror of Erised functions, states that "it shows nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts," and claims that this is why Harry sees himself surrounded by them (213). Said Mahammad El Sowy reads this moment as a happy reunion, where Harry can imagine himself standing between his parents like a frozen image, and even finds poignancy in Rowling identifying with Harry.²⁶ While Harry accepts Dumbledore's explanation without question, the lack of meaningful interaction between Harry and his parents suggests that he still feels, in some way, disconnected from them. John Pennington argues that "the Mirror of Erised suggests that the good—Harry's parents particularly—are somehow stuck in limbo, or a kind of purgatory" (92). Reading this moment as a literal version of purgatory is problematic. Nothing about the scene suggests that the Potters are stuck between life and death, watching, and waiting for their son to join them. In a figurative sense, though, they are stuck in a sort of limbo for Harry. He can see them, but that is the limit to his interaction. He cannot talk to them or ask them questions, and perhaps saddest of all, he cannot even imagine himself interacting with them in any way other than to just sit and view them with a sense of longing. Harry

²⁵ Potentially, this scene could be read to indicate that Lily is genuinely looking back at Harry through the veil of death, thus the tears. If this is the case, she is seeing her son for the first time in almost ten years.

²⁶ El Sowy points to an interview where Rowling said that she would see her dead mother in the Mirror of Erised. At the risk of seeming to psychoanalyze Rowling, this might suggest another reason why Lily's death is given more prominence than James's.

makes numerous return visits to the mirror, and soon he forgets about all else.²⁷

Eventually, Dumbledore is forced to intercede and move the mirror to prevent Harry from giving in to hopeless longing for what has been taken from him.

Harry's discovery of the Mirror of Erised coming so soon after receiving the Cloak of Invisibility from Dumbledore seems to be more than coincidental, and while it is tempting to read Dumbledore as an almost Machiavellian manipulator who callously orchestrates events to put Harry in a position where he has to die, the text offers a less sinister interpretation of Dumbledore's actions as early as *Sorcerer's Stone*. Ron, Hermione, and Harry even discuss this at the end of *Sorcerer's Stone*: "D'you think he meant you to do it?" said Ron. "Sending you your father's Cloak and everything?" (302). Harry, displaying unusual clarity of insight, responds:

I think he sort of wanted to give me a chance [. . .] I reckon he had a pretty good idea we were going to try, and instead of stopping us, he just taught us enough to help. I don't think it's an accident he let me find out how the mirror worked. It's almost like he thought I had the right to face Voldemort if I could. (302)

The way Harry phrases his response is important. Firstly, it reveals Harry's awareness that Dumbledore is attempting to guide him through moral lessons. While that would be seemingly fitting, given that he is the headmaster of a school, the lessons that Dumbledore has to offer are decidedly not part of the standard school curriculum (even at Hogwarts). Secondly, Harry's use of the word "right" in facing Voldemort presages the discussion that he and Dumbledore have in *Chamber of Secrets*, where Dumbledore emphasizes the importance of choices.

²⁷ Trenton McNulty argues that the mirror is inspired by the myth of Narcissus, but also notes that while this might be the inspiration, the mirror serves an entirely different purpose in Harry Potter.

Allowing Harry to find the Mirror of Erised grants Harry his first glimpse of his family, and while Hagrid has already begun the process of exalting them in Harry's imagination, Dumbledore has made them, in a way, more real for Harry. To some extent, though, seeing his parents serves as a pointed reminder of Harry's own mortality. Prior to seeing his parents in the mirror, they exist only as abstractions for Harry. All he knows is that they were good and powerful witches and wizards who defied the Dark Lord. Once he sees them in the Mirror of Erised, however, they move from the abstract realm to tangible representations, much like photographs. Roberta Trites states that "accepting the death of the parent (the ultimate authority figure) creates the ultimate grief, for from it the child learns of his own mortality (478). Drawing upon Roland Barthes's theories of how photography objectifies the dead, thereby reinforcing the permanency of death, she points out that the same is not true "in Harry Potter's world, where photographs wave at the person watching them. Wizard photographs have agency, so they serve as artifacts that defy death (478). Quite the contrary to Trites' assertion, the Mirror of Erised (and the treasure trove of pictures that Harry receives at the end of *Sorcerer's Stone*) in no way negate or defy death. Instead, as Trenton McNulty argues, they serve as constant reminders of "the literal and metaphorical divide between life and death" (45). Thus, the interactions offered by these are superficial at best, *but* they do serve to give Harry faces to connect the stories to, which in a way, makes the connections even stronger. Rowling even seems to call attention to this idea. At the end of *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry is at a particularly low point. Although he manages to save himself and Sirius Black from a fate worse than death—the Dementor's Kiss—he laments that he failed to clear Sirius's name and that he inadvertently forced Peter Pettigrew to return to his master by preventing

Black and Lupin from killing Wormtail. In that moment, Dumbledore affirms the correctness of Harry's decision by once again comparing him to James: "I knew your father very well [. . .] he would have saved Pettigrew too, I am sure of it" (427).

Similarly, when Harry reveals that he had mistook himself performing the Patronus for his father, Dumbledore immediately recontextualizes the moment for Harry: "you think the dead we loved every truly leave us? You think that we don't recall them more clearly than ever in times of great trouble? Your father is alive in you, Harry, and shows himself most plainly when you have need of him" (427-428). Dumbledore actively encourages Harry to emulate his father, because James was, after all, a good man who stood against Lord Voldemort and refused to yield, even to the point of death. In encouraging Harry to see his father in himself, Dumbledore is almost suggesting that Harry can serve as a sort of self-referential icon, a daily reminder made manifest in the mirror of the person he should aspire to be.²⁸

At key points throughout the series, though, Harry has moments, with his discovery of the Mirror of Erised, where he has fleeting experiences that allow him to gain some insights into his parents beyond what he has been told. Unfortunately, these are not always pleasant. When dementors disrupt a quidditch match in *Prisoner of Azkaban*,

²⁸ Harry's idealized view of his father is challenged when he is required to take Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape in *Order of the Phoenix*. To prepare for these lessons, Snape prunes a series of memories from his mind and stores them in Dumbledore's Pensieve. Harry is naturally curious as to what Snape is so eager to keep hidden from him, and when he finds himself alone with the Pensieve, his propensity for snooping gets the better of him. He then relives a painful moment in Snape's life in which Snape is openly bullied and humiliated by James Potter and his friends. In that moment, Harry realizes that "his father had been every bit as arrogant as Snape had always told him," which momentarily disrupts his view of his father (*Order of the Phoenix* 650). Feeling shame for what he sees his father do and empathy for Snape, he reaches out to the only people who can provide clarity for him, Remus Lupin and Sirius Black. Once they have assured him that James "was a good person," and that he grew out of being an idiot, Harry is mollified (*Order of the Phoenix* 671). Harry doesn't even dwell on this scene much again until *Deathly Hallows* when he learns how enamored Snape was with Lily.

Harry hears Lily's final moment. As he begins to succumb to the effects of the dementors, he hears her beg, "*Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead—*" (179). Harry's attempts to learn to produce a Patronus charm are stymied, in some ways, because he keeps hearing more and more snippets of the night his parents died, and while these are grim echoes of the past, they are also the only time he has heard their voices. They become, like the Mirror of Erised, a powerful lure, but Harry having learned his lesson with the mirror, rescues himself when he arrives at the conclusion that "they are dead and listening to echoes of them won't bring them back" (243). Harry again has a brief encounter with his parents near the climax of *Goblet of Fire*. During his duel with Voldemort, Harry's defensive spell becomes entwined with Voldemort's Killing Curse, resulting in what Dumbledore later terms "Priori Incantatem" or "The Reverse Spell effect" (697). Smoke-like beings in the forms of Voldemort's most recent victims, including his parents, emerge from the Dark Lord's wand. Although they speak to Harry briefly, they only do so to help him make his escape. It is their final appearance that is most telling, however. In *Deathly Hallows*, when Harry chooses to walk into the Forbidden Forest to face Voldemort, fully intent on sacrificing himself for others, he uses the power of the Resurrection Stone to summon James and Lily to him (along with Remus Lupin and Sirius Black). Few words pass between them. Lily tells Harry, "You've been so brave," and James asserts "we are . . . so proud of you" (*Deathly Hallows* 699). These are both affirmations of their love for Harry and praise for the fact that he has the courage and love needed to lay down his life for the sake of others. Framed in this context, Harry is making "an utterly Christian sacrifice" (Stojilkov 138). More importantly, he seems to do so because he has incorporated the lessons that he was

intended to take from his parents. He has the courage to face his death knowingly, and the love to do so in the hopes of saving others. But as Stojilkov points out, it is “not one person, but the whole wizarding and, possibly, Muggle population” for whom Harry sacrifices himself (138). Not only has he learned his lessons, but he has also transcended the role models that they provide, for his actions are far greater and more profound than theirs.

While Lily and James are afforded a place of primacy in Harry’s moral edification, they are far from the only examples of martyrs that serve as exemplars to Harry on how to face death. With the notable exceptions of Arthur Weasley and Hagrid, all of Harry’s adult male role models are lost in the fight against Voldemort. Many of these losses come in *Deathly Hallows*, where Harry is stripped of the last vestiges of his childhood innocence, and almost all of them are sacrificial in nature. Hedwig seemingly dies to protect Harry from a killing curse. Mad-eye Moody gives his life so that Harry might be moved to a safe location. Dobby the house elf sacrifices himself to save Harry and his friends from Malfoy Manor. Remus Lupin and his wife Tonks die during the siege of Hogwarts Castle, as do many of Harry’s friends and classmates, such as Lavender Brown, Collin Creevy, and Fred Weasley. More than any of the other novels in the series, *Deathly Hallows* serves as an extended examination on how heroism is rooted not in aggression, but instead in love---specifically, the Greater Love that Christ commends in John 15:13. Contrary to what Nikolajeva suggests, that the reader will just “take it for granted” that many of Harry’s friends will die, these deaths serve a purpose in Rowling’s narrative (22). Karin Kokorski contends that “Fred, Lupin, Tonks and many others die a bad death in the Battle of Hogwarts,” based on the fact that they die violent deaths (353).

However, their deaths are still in service to a noble purpose. As such, they serve as reminders, both for Harry and the reader, that love and heroism can elevate the final reality that we must all face from something to be feared and dreaded to something that cannot just be accepted, but also made to serve a higher purpose. Harry's friends and mentors do not throw their lives away without thought. Like the march on the Black Gate in *Lord of the Rings*, their deaths are born out of hope for a better world to come and the willingness to enact it for those that they love.

While *Deathly Hallows* might be the novel in which the most deaths in the series occur, *Goblet of Fire* marks the point where the series shifts both in terms of tone and urgency because Lord Voldemort returns to physical form, but the book is also important because that return is punctuated by the death of Cedric Diggory. Cedric's death has a profound effect on Harry, in no small part because Harry must wrestle with survivor's guilt. Although Dumbledore acknowledges that Diggory dies simply because he "strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort" (*Goblet of Fire* 724), had Voldemort not been bent on capturing Harry, Cedric would have never been placed into the position of facing the Dark Lord. Though Harry is obviously blameless in Cedric's death, the anger and frustration that he feels throughout most of *Order of the Phoenix* hints at the psychological trauma that he has endured in witnessing Cedric die. In her exploration of survivor's guilt in the Harry Potter series, Jessica Seymour posits that Cedric Diggory serves as the innocent bystander in the story, noting that such characters' deaths "are not as emotionally fraught as some other deaths in the series because these characters are not as well known to the reader, but they are important because they demonstrate the destructive nature of war and hatred, and the potential good that can be found when the

main characters are shown using these deaths as motivations to strive for better, more reflective lives” (123). Classifying Cedric’s death this way is problematic, though. Cedric is an innocent in the war against Voldemort, but by the time of his death, he and Harry have arrived at a point of friendly rivalry. After all, they are both Seekers on their Quidditch teams, both school champions in the Triwizard Tournament, and both interested in the same girl, Cho Chang.

Just as so many of the other deaths in the series serve to function as exemplars, so too is Cedric elevated to the status of a martyr and held up as the model of correct, moral behavior in the face of death. At the close of *Goblet of Fire*, Dumbledore addresses Cedric’s death directly, making it a part of his end-of-year speech. To some extent, this would almost seem a puzzling choice, particularly given how he explains these events to a roomful of students. After telling the assembled students that “Cedric Diggory was murdered by Lord Voldemort,” Dumbledore ends with this entreaty: “Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave, because he strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort. Remember Cedric Diggory” (724).²⁹ As Karin Kokorski points out, Dumbledore “celebrates Cedric as a freedom fighter and a role model” (351). By emphasizing his death as a moral choice, though, Dumbledore reinforces that “the true mark of Voldemort’s evil is his willingness to casually dispose of Cedric Diggory” (Cockrell 26). It further underscores just how serious and dangerous Voldemort’s return to physical form is; it “directs our attention to the kind of paranoid,

²⁹ On the surface, this would almost seem to work at cross-purposes to Dumbledore’s intentions. Younger students hearing how callously Voldemort slew one of their older and more experienced classmates might well see this as a warning *not* to cross the Dark Lord.

destruction that lies in the wake of death when it is feared, denied, challenged” (Hitchcock 77). Dumbledore’s message, while addressed to the entire body of Hogwarts students, seems pointedly directed towards Harry. In calling on Harry to remember Cedric, Dumbledore ensures that his death serves as a constant reminder to Harry what the consequences of failure will be, not just for him, but for everyone.

Cedric’s death is important because it has several notable effects on Harry. Perhaps the most obvious difficulty that arises for Harry is that he has to contend with feelings of guilt. Nikolajeva suggests that Cedric’s death serves no purpose, as he is nothing to Harry “other than rival [and] rivals are to be disposed of” (22), but as Christina Hitchcock attests, Cedric’s death is an important step in Harry’s acceptance of death, as it reminds him “that he was allowed to live because others were willing to die” (77). If Harry is to learn to die in emulation of his parents (and by extension, Christ) then “Cedric’s death—the first Harry experiences with any self-awareness—is one of the first steps in this process for Harry” (Hitchcock 77). Cedric’s death is traumatizing for Harry. In the early chapters of *Order of the Phoenix*, Dudley reveals that Harry has been having nightmares, in which he apparently relives the confrontation with Voldemort that left Cedric dead. Grimes labels this as a loss of innocence (104), but Kokorski more forcefully contends that Cedric’s death “marks a traumatic event in his life which furthers his maturation” (351). Rowling suggests as much with the appearance of the thestrals in *Order of the Phoenix*. These skeletal, winged horses, we learn, can only be seen by “people who have seen death” (446). Though they have been present throughout Harry’s time at Hogwarts, he only sees them for the first time after Cedric’s death. This suggests, as Wolosky argues, that “Harry sees them only after his experience of death has altered

his view of the world” (qtd in Kokorski 351). As an infant, Harry would have witnessed his parents’ deaths, but only when he is able to process death in a meaningful way do they appear to him. Arguably, this explanation even answers the question why they don’t appear to Harry at the end of *Goblet of Fire*. At the moment, Cedric’s death is so fresh in his memory that he has yet to process it fully. By the time he returns, two months later, he has apparently done so.³⁰

While Rowling emphasizes the effect that Cedric’s death has on Harry, she also provides Harry with some insights into how Cedric perceives his own death. Death comes for Cedric so swiftly and suddenly that the boy is unable to react and meets his demise completely unprepared physically. Yet the way his echo (to use Dumbledore’s terminology for the spirit that emerges from Voldemort’s wand), reacts to death suggests that mentally and spiritually, at least, he is prepared. Dumbledore claims that the echo “retained Cedric’s appearance and character” (698). Taken as truth, this means that Cedric’s primary concern in death is not for himself. He has neither remorse that he has died nor recriminations for Harry that he has been caught unaware in a trap laid for someone else. What he does voice is concern for his still living parents, asking that Harry take his body back for their sake. In death then, he serves as yet another form of exemplar, still thinking of others more than himself and accepting without complaint that his death has come. He serves as a very real lesson of what Dumbledore suggests in the

³⁰ At the 2004 Edinburgh Book Festival, Rowling confirmed that this was her intention and not a slip up on her part, though she confesses to having made a few along the way. Rowling’s exact phrasing “you can see them only when you really understand death in a broader sense, when you really know what it means,” suggests that the ability to see thestrals only comes when death has been grappled with and understood.

first novel, that “to the well-ordered mind, death is but the next great adventure” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 297).

Just as Cedric’s death both serves as an exemplar and aids in Harry developing a more sophisticated understanding of what it means to die, so too does Sirius’ Black’s fate work to further Harry’s acceptance of death while simultaneously providing models of behavior, both admirable and problematic. An original member of the Order of the Phoenix, Sirius languishes for twelve years in Azkaban Prison for a crime he did not commit, only to be forced into hiding once he escapes. He is no doubt brave and courageous, and as Harry’s godfather, he naturally becomes a role model for the maturing wizard. His death, near the conclusion of *Order of the Phoenix*, is far more immediately traumatic for Harry. At first, Harry denies the reality of his death, simply because he appears to just fall through a veil,³¹ but when Sirius does not immediately return, Harry begins to fear the worst. After he realizes that Sirius is dead and is safely returned to Hogwarts, Harry flies into a rage, destroying items around Dumbledore’s office and lamenting the loss of his godfather through anger and pain. When Dumbledore tries to explain that “suffering like this proves you are still a man! This pain is part of being human—,” Harry retorts “THEN—I—DON’T—WANT—TO—BE—HUMAN! [. . .] I WANT OUT, I WANT IT TO END” (824). Harry’s anger, however momentary is “a normal and transformational response to deep grief” (Lesperance). Harry moves quickly

³¹ Pilar Alderete-Diez points out that “Rowling plays with Harry’s disbelief, inoculating the reader with the same doubt.” She goes on to note that in the years leading up to the publication of the final book in 2007, there was considerable online speculation that Sirius would return, either through the veil or otherwise, to the land of the living. As someone who was a casual reader on some of these forums at the time, I remember these arguments, and many of them stemmed from arguments originally centered around tropes common in some popular media (chiefly superhero comics and soap operas), where if there’s no body shown, then the “dead” individual was almost certain to return.

from overwhelming anger to complete silence, refusing, initially, to even speak to Dumbledore. Taub and Severtay-Seib note that his “reluctance to discuss his grief” is fitting with his maturity level as a teenager. He feels Sirius’s loss more keenly than Cedric’s because he has a closer relationship with his godfather. The emotional response that he has is, therefore, realistically more intense. Here is, however, a notable difference in how Harry processes these deaths long term. Throughout *Order of the Phoenix*, Harry is prone to yelling at his friends and routinely losing his temper. By the opening of *Half-Blood Prince*, a shift has occurred:

From a volatile Harry, we now have a hero who is more in control of his emotions. Harry has changed from being a temperamental to a tempered hero. This is not to say that Harry suffers less in the sixth book. In fact, one might argue that the pain he endures with the loss of Sirius is just the beginning of a long and agonizing deterioration of his sense of comfort and well-being. (Sangil 117)

Harry himself is growing and maturing, but he is also learning to come to grips with death as an inevitability. Not only is it inevitable because death is simply part of the human condition, but Voldemort’s return means that more good people will suffer and die at the hands of the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters. Like Cedric, Sirius serves as a reminder of how perilous the wizarding world has now become and how easily and quickly life can be snatched away.

While Sirius is no doubt brave, he is also, to some extent, foolhardy. As Alice Mills points out, “he chooses, against strong advice, to leave his safe house and fight alongside Harry. It is his longing to be both at liberty and of use, what might be termed his dogged determination against all sensible advice, that draws him to the dueling

grounds” (247). Unlike Cedric, who runs afoul of Voldemort because of no fault of his own, Sirius deliberately places himself in harm’s way. He seeks out risks because, as Dumbledore explains, “Sirius was a brave, clever, and energetic man, and such men are not usually content to sit at home in hiding while they believe others to be in danger” (*Order of the Phoenix* 825). Dumbledore doesn’t blame Sirius, as Harry suggests. Instead, once again, he chooses to extol what was best about Harry’s godfather. While he might *gently* try to push Harry to see the dangers of recklessly running towards danger without thought (a trait that Harry shares), he nonetheless still offers Sirius as an exemplar to Harry.

Sirius’s death also marks the first time that Harry actively begins to probe into matters of the soul. Despite having had contact with various phantoms and apparitions of lost loved ones in the past, with Sirius, he seeks out Nearly Headless Nick, one of the many ghosts haunting Hogwarts, and asks about their nature. Harry, harboring hope that he might still see his godfather again, is initially relieved when Nick reveals that only witches and wizards may return as ghosts, but the spirit quickly disabuses him of such notions: “Wizards can leave an imprint of themselves upon the earth, to walk palely where their living selves once trod . . . but very few wizards choose that path” (861).³² When Harry presses on with his vain hope, Nick explains quite bluntly why he returned: “I was afraid of death [. . .] I chose to remain behind” (861). Despite Harry noticing a momentary look of fear on his godfather’s face, Sirius, like Cedric before him, seems to be spiritually ready to accept his death, even if he is momentarily taken by surprise.

³² For the first time in the series, the ghosts being to seem genuinely tragic as well. Until this point, they mostly serve as comic relief.

Sirius is not seeking death in that moment. While his actions are foolish, they are not suicidal. He accepts death and passes on to whatever awaits after death. Harry is also provided with a key lesson here—that the path of remaining behind, of trying to reject death—is unwise. While on some level, his death might serve a cautionary function, his acceptance of death provides yet one more layer of reinforcement to the idea that Rowling so clearly advocates in this series—that it is better to die for others than to selfishly cling to life beyond all reason.

Even a character as problematic as Severus Snape is given a heroic death in the end, and he too serves as a model for Harry. Unlike many of the more obviously heroic characters who show affection for Harry, Snape has never shown even the slightest hint of kindness towards him, and yet Harry comes to learn that Snape has, for most of Harry's life, worked to keep Harry from harm. In "The Great Snape Debate," Applebaum questions whether Snape "could be the bad guy he needed to be due to basic character traits, or whether he crafted himself like an actor on the stage" (99). Even before the revelation of Snape's true loyalty in *Deathly Hallows*, hints at where his allegiance lies are presented throughout the series. He actively works to save Harry's life in *Sorcerer's Stone*.³³ Likewise, in *Goblet of Fire*, when the false Moody removes Harry from the Quidditch grounds expressly against Dumbledore's instructions, Snape's face is one of the three that appears in the foe-glass in Moody's office. And in *Order of the Phoenix*, Dumbledore reveals to Harry that Snape alerted members of the Order to Harry's danger when he set out for the Ministry of Magic. What is far more apparent, once the full extent

³³ That Snape could slither his way back into Voldemort's graces after thwarting an attempt on Harry's life by his surrogate, Quirrell, is proof that Snape has to be a gifted actor, but it still does not resolve Applebaum's question.

of Snape's activities is learned, is that he not only kills Dumbledore to spare the older wizard pain and suffering, but he has also been risking his life by acting as Dumbledore's spy and agent since Lord Voldemort's return to corporeal form, a task he continues even after Dumbledore has passed. If Snape is loyal to Dumbledore, and the cruelty is an act, designed with the purpose of deceiving Voldemort and his followers, does that make his behavior acceptable? Is Snape engaging in necessary evil for the greater good? As Megan Birch points out, "Snape employs [a] pedagogy of fear and intimidation" (111). Harry and Neville Longbottom are often the victims of his abusive tactics, but would Neville have shown the same resiliency to abuse when the Carrows took over had it not been for Snape?

Snape is a deeply flawed man, regardless of how we answer these questions. We may accept that he does terrible things for good reasons, just as Harry comes to accept that Dumbledore's apparent murder was actually an act of mercy. Charles Taliaferro argues that while Snape was once a servant of Voldemort and is directly responsible for the death of Harry's parents, he feels "deep remorse for those acts, but he is unable to publicly confess his feelings" (242). As such, "he is impaired because he can't bring himself to fully renounce his past wrongs and move beyond them" (242). For Birch, this is an example of Rowling highlighting "individual decisions that led to tragedies of individual suffering" (113). Snape is thus rendered as the most morally complex character in the series. Shortly after the release of *Deathly Hallows*, Rowling answered numerous questions about the series in a Bloomsbury online forum. In that chat, she addresses the question of Snape's heroism: "he remains rather cruel, a bully, riddled with bitterness and insecurity—and yet he loved, and showed loyalty to that love and, ultimately, laid down

his life because of it. That's pretty heroic." Arguably, it is his willingness to continually put himself in danger for Harry's sake, even if he does so only because Harry is Lily Evans's son, that fundamentally alters Harry's perception of Snape, leading him to declare "he was probably the bravest man I ever knew" (*Deathly Hallows* 758).

Death becomes an issue of both ethics and character in the Harry Potter series. While Rowling makes it clear that death is not something that her characters deliberately seek, they do not shy from it when it comes. They accept that death is the natural order of things. Perhaps more importantly, their acceptance of death is paired with their ability to love others. For Rowling, the Christian notion of love which is rooted in charity and selflessness is central to this discussion. Only when a character can put the love of others above their own selfish desires that they are elevated to the status of heroes and exemplars.

CHAPTER THREE: THE LIFE AND IGNOBLE DEATH OF TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE

Throughout the Harry Potter series, there are numerous examples of positive role models provided for who show a healthy acceptance of death. By exploring themes of death and dying from an ethical perspective, Rowling develops a love-centered heroic ethos. Harry's various role models then emphasize that death is not only something that cannot be avoided, but that there are times when it becomes necessary to lay down one's life for the common good: a sacrifice that requires courage and emphasizes selfless love. Standing as a singular antithesis to this ethos is Lord Voldemort, who seems incapable of love. Driven entirely by self-interest, he is arrogant, cruel, and vindictive. Unlike Harry's positive exemplars who accept death, Voldemort is driven by an obsessive compulsion to thwart death at any cost, and it is this very desire that drives him to commit the most heinous of acts in the hopes of gaining immortality. While Voldemort might surround himself with his followers, the self-styled Death Eaters, they are not freethinking agents, nor do they seem to share in drive to attain deathlessness; they are simply tools to be used, and nothing more.

As Voldemort is the only major villain of the Harry Potter series,³⁴ it is not surprising that there has been considerable criticism regarding his function within the story. M. Katherine Grimes, writing before the publication of the fifth book, examined

³⁴ The vast majority of his followers are literally rendered faceless by the masks that they wear, and while many of them are named within the series, they are, for the most part, all interchangeable. Only the Malfoys and Bellatrix Lestrange seem to have much in the way of individual character: the Malfoys primarily being motivated by greed, power and prestige, while Bellatrix seems mostly motivated by her desire to inflict carnage and chaos.

the Harry Potter series in the context of fairy tale structures and archetypes. In the context of fairy tales, Grimes argues that Voldemort represents the feared father, or in Harry's case, he is "the extreme of Vernon Dursley" (95). In archetypal terms, she argues, "Voldemort represents the evil king . . . like Pharaoh, Herod [or] Romulus and Remus's uncle King Amulius" (113). In this sense, Voldemort is not a relative of Harry, but instead "an evil person with power who fears losing that power to another and thus attempts to kill the usurper in childhood" (113).³⁵ In *God, the Devil and Harry Potter*, published in 2002, minister and author John Killinger examines Rowling's output in a Christian context, in part to argue against many Evangelical Christians who condemn the book as satanic.³⁶ Central to Killinger's argument is that Rowling's work "is not only dependent on a Christian understanding of life and the universe *but actually grows out of that understanding*" (11, italics in original). After the publication of *Deathly Hallows* in 2007, Killinger revisited and expanded on many of his initial themes in *Life, Death, and the Resurrection of Harry Potter*. Like Grimes, Killinger compares Voldemort to an evil archetype: Satan. Killinger terms Voldemort "the prince of darkness in these stories" (23). Writing about death and depictions of the afterlife in children's fantasy, Karin Korkorski points out that Voldemort exhibits some satanic qualities, arguing that the various processes he undertakes to cheat death transform him "into something more demonic than human" (354). Lauren Berman's article "Rowling's Devil: Ancient Archetype of Modern

³⁵ Grimes might well be congratulated on her predictive powers, as a year after the publication of her essay, Rowling revealed that Voldemort had indeed sought to kill Harry because he feared that Harry would not only "Possess a power the Dark Lord Knows Not," but be his undoing. Of course, Rowling herself had hinted as much in *Chamber of Secrets*, when the students begin to speculate about Harry being a rival dark lord when they learn he can speak Parseltongue.

³⁶ As recently as 2022, Greg Locke, a Tennessee pastor, held a book burning where copies of Harry Potter, among other popular works of fantasy, were destroyed by a member of his congregation. (See Smolar).

Manifestation?” provides one of the most thorough examinations of Voldemort in the context of the Judeo-Christian construction of Satan. Berman states that Voldemort “most strongly resembles the Christian devil as he appears in the New Testament and in medieval folklore” (165). For Berman, Voldemort most clearly resembles the Biblical depictions of Satan in his methods, such as his attempts to deceive others and tempt them into evil, but his appearance she attributes to folkloric adaption, which transformed the devil in the monstrous being more easily recognized by the masses as Satan. With Voldemort, she contends, Rowling “constitutes a new incarnation of the conventional figure of the devil as it combines numerous religious, cultural and literary resources with modern traits well suited to the author’s progressive vision” (192). Tom Marvolo Riddle, the self-styled Lord Voldemort, is not, however, a demonic force. Although he possesses supernatural powers and is transformed by his attempts to extend his life, he is still very much just a man. This chapter explores how Voldemort operates as a counterpoint both to the heroism and courage of Harry’s moral exemplars, who sacrifice themselves out of love for a greater cause, and to Harry himself, who becomes, by the end of the series, the master of death. Rather than embracing his humanity, Voldemort attempts not just to separate himself from others but also to set himself above everyone else. Whereas Harry’s parents, friends, and mentors display positive characteristics, such as courage and selflessness, Voldemort is consumed entirely by egotism. For Rowling, his life and ignoble death serve as a cautionary tale, for in letting his fear of death take hold of him, he commits morally repudiable acts, and as he does so, he suffers from physical degradation, symbolizing the damage done to his soul.

Voldemort's first introduction into the series is as whispered rumors, his very name too dreadful to speak for the wizard community (Muggles, of course, don't know he exists), and throughout the series, only a handful of witches and wizards seem able to muster the courage needed to refer to him by name and not "You-Know-Who." Initially, all the wizarding world knows is that in his attempt to kill the infant Harry Potter, Voldemort seemingly met his end: "No one knows why, or how, but they're saying that when he couldn't kill Harry Potter, Voldemort's power somehow broke—and that's why he's gone" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 12). While euphemistically, "gone" is often used to mean dead, that is not the case with Voldemort, though the wizarding world clearly wishes it were. Still, there are those like Dumbledore and those in his confidence who remain vigilant, which is why Hagrid tells an eleven-year-old Harry that Voldemort simply "disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you . . . Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die" (57). Hagrid's declaration reveals a profound skepticism about whether or not Voldemort has truly been bested; it also allows Rowling to provide the first tantalizing hint as to *why* Voldemort was able to survive.

In *Chamber of Secrets*, Harry learns that Voldemort was once a student named Tom Marvolo Riddle, and while Dumbledore acknowledges that there are similarities between the Dark Lord and Harry as early as the second book of the series, it is not until the penultimate novel that Harry really comes to appreciate just how remarkably similar their lives are in some ways. Like Harry, Riddle loses his mother when he is too young to remember, and he too is placed into the care of those who have not always had his best interests at heart. Despite the similarities in their early loss of parents and subsequent

abusive and neglectful caregivers, Riddle turns out very differently from Harry in part because of how he internalizes his mother's death. Until the moment Hagrid bursts dramatically into his life on his eleventh birthday, Harry believes the lie that his parents died in a car crash. If he feels bitter about their deaths, the narrator makes no mention of the fact. Instead, he seems to simply accept that death is something that happens. Tragic though it might be that he lost his parents, it is something that can happen to anyone at any time. Perhaps just as importantly, he still accepts their deaths as part of the natural process of life even after he learns the truth. If death can come for normal people, why should it not come for witches and wizards too? Riddle, on the other hand, equates dying with weakness. In the memory of Dumbledore's first encounter with an eleven-year-old Tom Riddle, the boy declares, "My mother can't have been magic, or she wouldn't have died" (*Half-Blood Prince* 275). At first glance, Riddle seems to be suffering from a form of denial, but the implications seem to hint at more deep-seated concerns. In *Grief in Children*, psychologist Atle Dyregrov notes that while it is uncommon, some children "make up various fantasies about death and the dead person" (43). At the same time, however, children often also look for "causes and meaning in death" (44). Tom Riddle's rush to ascribe mortality to something that only happens to non-magical people suggest that he has already tried to rationalize death as something that happens to those who are not special. Those who are not like him. Furthermore, it suggests that he has developed a fear of death himself, which Dyregrov notes is one of the most common childhood anxieties about death (25). In Riddle, however, these fears persist throughout his life. They shape his entire outlook on the world and others and drive him towards his goal of dominating everything and everyone, including death.

Riddle's belief that he can overcome death, just like his conviction that he is superior to others, is in a form of narcissism. Arnold Rothstein defines narcissism as "a felt quality of perfection" (4). Rothstein elaborates that the narcissist's personal sense of perfection can manifest in many forms, noting that most often, they "feel entitled to have what they want when they want it just because they want it. What they want is often narcissistically invested. They feel entitled to pursue it, no matter how they do so or whom they hurt" (67). In addition to entitlement, narcissists are driven by "beliefs of personal superiority" (Grapsas et al 150). Unlike Harry, who reacts with genuine skepticism upon learning that he is a wizard, Riddle immediately embraces this as true, telling Dumbledore, "I knew I was different," and "I knew I was special" (*Half-Blood Prince* 271). He also has a profound distaste for anything that might suggest he was mundane or ordinary, as evidenced by his reaction to being called by his proper name, simply because it is a common name. In many ways, this also explains why Riddle becomes so irate at discovering that his father was a Muggle and his desire to embrace an entirely new identity, one which transfigures his common name into something he "knew wizards everywhere would someday fear to speak" (*Chamber of Secrets* 314). The name he chooses is revelatory for two reasons. First, it reveals his desire to escape from death. The French *vol de mort* is typically translated into English as "flight from death."³⁷ Secondly, it reveals a desire for power and domination over others by presuming the title of lord. While Remus Lupin argues that "there are no wizarding princes," the Bloody

³⁷ There is some room for alternative translations here, though. As Neil Shortland and John Dunne points out in "Al-Qa'ida and the Horcruxes," "the French preposition *de* is flexible and ambiguous," and that the name might just as easily be read as "flight *of* death," instead of "flight from death" (165). Given that we are shown that Voldemort is one of the only wizards capable of flight without any notable means of locomotion, such as a broomstick, the Dark Lord might well intend the first meaning.

Baron and Sir Nearly Headless Nick suggest that titled nobility are, or at least were, part of the wizarding world, but titles are either inherited or conferred upon an individual by the Crown. In Voldemort's case, he simply assumes the title without having earned one, simply because, as a narcissistic individual, he is convinced of his own innate superiority.

Even before Tom Riddle adopts the pseudonym that he is more commonly known by in the wizarding world, he displays proclivities towards violence and control. While Tom Riddle's life in Wool's Orphanage could not have been ideal, in many ways, his life there seems preferable to the abuse that Harry endures from his aunt, uncle, and cousin. The only instances of abuse mentioned in connection with Riddle, on the other hand, are those he directs outwards. Mrs. Cole, the director of the orphanage where Riddle was born, alludes to the boy hurting other children, as well as torturing and killing animals, and when Dumbledore interviews Tom, he tells the older wizard that "I can make bad things happen to people who annoy me. I can make them hurt if I want to" (*Half-Blood Prince* 271). While there might be a temptation to read this aggression as a sign of lingering childhood trauma resulting from the death of his mother, Dyregrov notes that violence and aggression are usually a result of "human caused deaths" and are often paired with emotional outbursts. Not only did Merope Guant die shortly after childbirth due to apparent natural causes, but Riddle also displays an almost eerily calm demeanor when he relates his violent tendencies. Dumbledore even confesses to Harry that he was made uneasy by Riddle's "obvious instincts for cruelty, secrecy, and domination" (276).³⁸

³⁸ Dumbledore also admits that he was "intrigued" by Tom Riddle, which seems to be a very strange choice of diction on Rowling's part, given that it implies a sort of fascination or even captivation. To some extent, this might also be a hint on Rowling's part that in his youth, Dumbledore was more than a little drawn to dangerous things himself, but in this scene, the Dumbledore who goes to meet with Tom Riddle is older and has already accepted a teaching position at Hogwarts.

What Riddle’s behavior at the orphanage suggests, however, is that even at the age of eleven, he had already developed a propensity for sadistic acts. Rothstein notes that sadistic acts are common in those exhibiting narcissism and are often driven by the desire to humiliate their target (99). Dumbledore should be taken at his word when he tells Harry he had no idea that he had “just met the most dangerous wizard of all time,” and that he “had no idea that he was to grow up to be what he is” (276).

That Dumbledore seemingly feels no guilt in allowing Tom Riddle to attend Hogwarts, despite his acknowledged proclivities, ties back to one of the broader themes of the novels—that our choices are what truly shape us. Rowling has avowed similar beliefs in her public statements, telling the Harvard graduating class of 2008 that “the moment you are old enough to take the wheel, responsibility lies with you.” In many ways, this is a rejection of the classical dichotomy used to explain our behaviors expressed as nature vs. nurture. As Justin Garcia explains:

the “nature versus nurture” debate is an academic question as to whether human behaviors, attitudes, and personalities are the result of innate biological or genetic factors (the “nature” side of the debate) or life experiences and experiential learning (“nurture”). In effect, this debate centers on whether individual human psyches are the hardwired result of evolutionary biology or are fluid and shaped by condition and circumstance.

For Rowling at least, neither one absolves a person of their own choices. However shaped or influenced we might be by our upbringing or our genetics, individual choices matter. Rowling’s decision to make *The Boy Who Lived* and *The Dark Lord* so similar, particularly in terms of how their lives begin, points to the possibility that either of them could have had a radically different life had they simply made different choices. In his examination of Christian elements in the Harry Potter series, Peter Ciaccio points out that

Rowling rejects simplistic dualism. Instead, he argues that in Rowling's work, "people are not divided between absolutely good or absolutely bad: the question is not about *who* is good and *who* is bad, it is rather about *what* is good and *what* is bad" (42). That Dumbledore allows Tom Riddle to attend Hogwarts, even when he has shown a willingness to hurt other children in the past, suggests that the older wizard believes that the boy's path is not predetermined and that Riddle might, given the opportunity, make choices that would alter his life for the better.³⁹

What Rowling demonstrates through Tom Riddle's transformation into Lord Voldemort is how morally and spiritually damaging evil actions can be. Voldemort's transformation is a conscious and deliberate one, yet it is rooted primarily in his own fear of death. Like the schoolyard bully attempting to prove that he is not afraid by exerting power over others, Voldemort attempts to assert his dominion over death. The method which he chooses, however, is one that literally damages his soul: he creates horcruxes. Although the first horcrux, Tom Riddle's diary, is introduced in *Chamber of Secrets*, Rowling delays revealing their true nature until *Half-Blood Prince*, where it is explained that a horcrux is "an object in which a person has concealed part of their soul" (497). The only way to create a horcrux is to commit murder, for as Horace Slughorn reveals, "killing rips the soul apart. The wizard intent upon creating a Horcrux would use the damage to his advantage" (498). In "The Last Enemy: Harry Potter and Western Anxiety about Death," Christina Hitchcock argues that Rowling incorporates Christian and Platonic ideas about death and the soul into her writing. She notes that Rowling borrows

³⁹ After all, as we learn in *Deathly Hallows*, Dumbledore himself alters the trajectory of his life when he makes the choice to abandon his youthful ambitions for conquest and "the greater good." Admittedly, it takes a tragedy for this change to occur, but Dumbledore knows that remorse can alter a person.

heavily from Plato in establishing that “the soul is the rightful seat of all the virtues. A soul that lacks virtues to any degree is not a fully good soul in the sense that it is not all that it should be. A soul which rejects the virtues . . . is harmful to itself” (79). Tom Riddle, consumed with self-interest, shows little to no regard for his own soul. Professor Slughorn’s warns the young wizard that “the soul is supposed to remain intact and whole. Splitting it is an act of violation, it is against nature” (498). Rowling establishes early on in the series that the soul is the animating life force of the individual. From the moment he arrives at Hogwarts, Harry is surrounded by ghosts, and while they might be a pale imitation of life,⁴⁰ they are still proof of an enduring force, the vital spark that makes a person who they are. In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Professor Lupin explains that dementors are capable of sucking out a person’s soul, noting that the process leaves the person alive in a physical sense but “no sense of self anymore, no memory. . . no anything” (247). Rowling also makes it very clear, as Hitchcock points out, “that in the world of Harry Potter, the soul is, generally speaking, immortal” (79). Paradoxically then, Tom Riddle’s fear of death drives him to damage the part of himself that is immortal already in an attempt to avoid the fate that awaits all people. In doing so, he eschews traditional Western values and norms, rooted in Judeo-Christian principles, specifically the injunction against murder. Riddle’s fear of death drives him to kill not once, but multiple times, suggesting, as Hitchcock puts it “a desire to be physically alive and to exercise the power of life and death in the physical world” (79). His decision to create seven

⁴⁰ And they are also proof of the dangers of the fear of death, as Nearly-Headless Nick points out in *Order of the Phoenix*. Unlike Voldemort, though, the ghosts seem more tragic than cautionary. While a ghost might fear death in the moment, nothing about them suggests that they engage in any deliberate attempts to forestall death; they are, as Nick confesses to Harry, simply too afraid to face the unknown.

horcruxes, damaging himself spiritually each time, means that “his soul is literally shredded to pieces” (Hitchcock 80). Tom Riddle’s transformation into Lord Voldemort is thus more than just symbolic. With each horcrux he chooses to make, he seemingly becomes less and less of who he was.

Although Harry will eventually witness Tom Riddle’s incremental change into the Dark Lord, the first time he actually sees Lord Voldemort in the series, the full process of transformation has already begun. In *Sorcerer’s Stone*, Harry is required to do a nighttime detention in the Forbidden Forest, where he finds out that something has been harming the unicorns. There, he encounters a cloaked figure and watches, in horror, as it feeds on the blood of a unicorn. Harry’s companions cry out in fear and desert him, and “the hooded figure raised its head and looked right at Harry—unicorn blood was dribbling down its front. It got to its feet and came swiftly towards Harry—he couldn’t move for fear” (256). Grimes argues that this moment is so traumatizing because it represents “both incredible evil and the destruction of innocence” (97); Harry’s inability to even react to what he is seeing, however, suggests an extreme emotional response defined as abjection. In the *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva theorized that one of the main effects of horror is to force the individual to come to terms with a perceived breakdown in order, which is triggered by the rational person encountering evidence of their own mortality. Most often, this evidence is presented as the dead and decaying body: “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject” (Kristeva 4). Being confronted with imagery that shows us our own demise is, according to Kristeva, a source of great trauma. Admittedly, the abject is somewhat mitigated here because unicorn’s blood, like that of the ghosts at Hogwarts,

is described as silvery, but the imagery is still uncomfortably morbid. It also invokes the imagery of the classic vampire, drunk with blood.

The vampiric symbolism cannot be accidental, particularly since we learn that “the blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself, and you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips” (258). Consumption of blood to sustain undeath is a common motif in horror literature, in part because it is a hideous mockery of the eucharist, where the blood of Christ is believed to be shared with believers (either literally or symbolically) in pursuit of life-everlasting.⁴¹ Here, abjection works on a second level as well. While all living creatures must consume other life to sustain themselves, this scene serves as a discomfiting reminder of that fact, creating a sense of revulsion for Harry and, ostensibly, the reader. The visceral description of blood dribbling down evokes something bestial and taboo, serving as a reminder of just how transgressive Voldemort’s quest for deathlessness is.

Like the vampires of folk legend, Voldemort has a sort of parasitic relationship with his host, which Harry discovers in his confrontation with Professor Quirrell. At first, Harry cannot fathom where Voldemort’s voice is coming from, but then Quirrell removes his turban and turns around: “Where there should have been a back to Quirrell’s head, there was a face, the most terrible face Harry had ever seen. It was chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 293). Once again,

⁴¹ Critics have noted that there has tended to be a strong element of antisemitism in vampire myths as well. Clare Reed’s article “Vampires and Gentiles: Jews, Mormons, and Embracing the Other” traces the history of antisemitism in European vampire traditions, pointing out that these tendencies are often strongest in British literature.

Harry is revolted by what he sees, the unnatural nature of it, though in this case, the effect is more of the uncanny, as explored by Freud, than of abjection. It is the appearance of a face where there should be none that is most upsetting to Harry, though the face itself is unnatural and distorted. During their exchange, Voldemort explains that “I have form only when I can share another’s body” (294). Firenze tells Harry that anyone who drinks unicorn blood is cursed to a half-life (258), but that serves as an apt descriptor of how Voldemort has existed since the night that he attempted to kill Harry. Rowling never explicitly uses the term undead to describe him as such, the fact that he only exists as something akin to a spirit if he is not possessing someone makes it quite clear that his existence is a wretched one. Like a vampire, he seems to be able to exert considerable control over his victims. Although Voldemort describes it as “sharing” a body, it is his will that is dominant. Even when Quirrell speaks to Harry, he seems to be at least marginally under Voldemort’s control, calling himself foolish. While the text is not explicit on this point, the evasive way that Quirrell references meeting Lord Voldemort seems to suggest less in the way of rhetorical debate and more in the form of mental domination—another of the abilities traditionally associated with vampires. The implication then is that Voldemort is forcing Quirrell to drink the unicorn’s blood for him, and like a parasite, he then in turn feeds off Quirrell.

Rowling’s portrayal of Voldemort’s obsessive quest for deathlessness could also be read as an allusion to other folk legends as well, most notably, the legend of the dybbuk. In recent horror films, the dybbuk is presented as a demonic figure, capable of bringing about all sorts of supernatural chaos and harm to anyone unfortunate enough to encounter one. In traditional Jewish folklore, however, the dybbuk is described quite

differently. According to Adler and Weirnik, a dybbuk is the soul of a particularly evil person that then has the ability to enter the bodies of others. Most notably, the reason why they possess other people is so that they can unnaturally extend their mortal lives, living on in physical form long after they should have died. In *Goblet of Fire*, Voldemort gives his followers some insights into the night he went to kill the infant Harry Potter and the resulting destruction of his physical form. He tells them “I was ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost . . . but still, I was alive. What I was, even I do not know . . . I who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality” (653). Curiously, Voldemort seems to admit to a sort of powerlessness here, but he quickly equates the fact that he was not slain to a form of triumph on his part. He also tells his followers that “only one power remained to me. I could possess the bodies of others” (653). Like a dybbuk, he has lived a wicked life, and he is afraid to pass on, instead possessing others that he might steal their lives for himself. Lauren Berman argues that one of the “motifs associated with the devil that Rowling incorporates into the Harry Potter books are demonic possession” (177). Voldemort, for all his evil, is not a demon. He may act in demonic ways, do demonic things, but he is merely a man who fears death and thus clings tenaciously to the physical act of living, no matter how empty that existence might be, devoid of friends, family, and love.

More importantly, though, Rowling ties all of the physical changes that Lord Voldemort endures to his diminishing moral character. In *Half-Blood Prince*, as Harry and Dumbledore explore the choices that led to Tom Riddle becoming Lord Voldemort, it is made manifestly clear that each time he creates a horcrux, his physical body changes in response to the damage done to his soul. Scott Sehon asserts in “The Soul in Harry

Potter” that “it is not immediately obvious how the damage to the soul translates into harm in the living human being. There is, after all, no indication that Voldemort’s mental faculties or magical abilities are in any way diminished” (16). To an extent, Sehon is correct. After all, Riddle still appears to be himself, apart from a slight glint of scarlet in his pupils, in Slughorn’s memory. By that point, Riddle had already killed and created his first horcrux (despite pretending to know nothing of them), but as he continues to divide his soul to make more horcruxes, the damage becomes more pronounced. When, for example, Harry witnesses his exchanges with Hepzibah Smith, who shows Riddle both the Cup of Helga Hufflepuff and Salazar Slytherin’s locket, Harry notices that the red gleam in his eyes has become more pronounced and seems to be visible every time he has an emotional response. After ten years pass and Voldemort has made more horcruxes, Harry notices that even more drastic alterations have occurred:

It was as though his features had been burned and blurred; they were waxy and oddly distorted, and the whites of the eyes now had a permanently bloody look, though the pupils were not yet the slits that Harry knew they would become. (*Half Blood Prince* 441)

Though neither man makes mention of the obvious physical alteration, Voldemort does acknowledge that he has “pushed the boundaries of magic further, perhaps, than they have ever been pushed” (443), suggesting that it is through his own efforts to achieve immortality that his once handsome features have been distorted into something grotesque.

There is, however, little debate that Rowling intends the alterations to Voldemort’s appearance to be indicative of his spiritual debasement. Dumbledore makes this point very clearly for Harry, stating that Voldemort was “so determined to evade death that he

would be prepared to murder many times, rip his soul repeatedly, so as to store it in many, separately concealed Horcruxes [. . .] As far as I know—as far, I am sure, as Voldemort knew—no wizard had ever done more than tear his soul in two” (500). Dumbledore also tells Harry that “the transformation he [Voldemort] has undergone seemed to me to only be explicable if his would was mutilated beyond the realms of what we might call ‘usual evil’” (502). On the surface, Dumbledore’s proclamations seem puzzling. If murder is the act that tears the soul, then any mass murder, such as Peter Pettigrew or Bellatrix Lestrange, would have torn their souls many times, placing them at the same tier of evil as Voldemort. Rowling, however, has alluded to the fact that more is needed than simply committing murder, though she has shied away from ever stating what that would be.⁴² Whatever additional spells or acts of evil might be needed are in a way irrelevant, however. What is more important is that Voldemort is so driven by his quest for immortality that he becomes utterly immoral in the process. As David Williams and Alan Kellner point out, he is motivated by “unwavering egocentrism—a trait that gets more pronounced as he becomes Lord Voldemort” (136). There seems little doubt that his propensity for open cruelty does increase over time. As a child, he was willing to hurt, but by the time Harry encounters him in *Goblet of Fire*, Voldemort no longer even seems to think of his victims as being wholly human—as evidence by his almost casual instruction to Wormtail to “kill the spare” (638). Shira Wolosky points out in her article “Harry Potter’s Ethical Paradigms: Augustine, Kant, and Feminist Moral Theory” that Voldemort revels in dealing out death. She argues that “Voldemort kills as a pure exercise

⁴² In a 2007 interview for *PotterCast*, Rowling said that “her editor looked like she would vomit” when Rowling explained how Pettigrew returned Voldemort to his rudimentary body, which led her to never explain the process of making a horcrux to anyone.

of domination, one he finds exhilarating, indeed empowering” (200). To some extent, his willingness to torture and kill anyone, even his followers if they cross him, is rooted in egocentrism, but his choices have defined him. He is soulless not because he was born a monster, but because he has made himself one.

Rowling reinforces Voldemort’s monstrosity both in his actions and his appearance. The sense of abjection that she employs in *Sorcerer’s Stone* is repeated in Harry’s next direct confrontation with Voldemort. After Cedric is killed, Harry is bound to the tombstone of Tom Riddle and forced to watch as Wormtail begins the ritual to restore Voldemort to physical form. Harry is understandably terrified by the situation, but Rowling makes a point of calling attention to just how repulsed he is by Voldemort’s appearance:

The thing Wormtail had been carrying had the shape of a crouched human child, except that Harry had never seen anything less like a child. It was hairless and scaly-looking, a dark, raw, red-dish black. Its arms and legs were thin and feeble, and its face—no child alive ever had a face like that—flat and snakelike, with gleaming red eyes [. . .] The thing seemed almost helpless; it raised its thin arms, put them around Wormtail’s neck, and Wormtail lifted it. As he did so, his hood fell back, and Harry saw the look of revulsion on Wormtail’s weak, pale face in the firelight as he carried the creature to the rim of the cauldron. For one moment, Harry saw the evil, flat face illuminated in the sparks dancing on the surface of the potion. And then Wormtail lowered the creature into the cauldron; there was a hiss, and it vanished below the surface; Harry heard its frail body hit the bottom with a soft thud. (640-641)

To complete the ritual, Wormtail desecrates the grave of Voldemort’s father, chops off his own hand, and then stabs Harry in the crook of the elbow to draw blood. While the components of the spell would seem to work to promote abjection, connecting to those elements that remind us of our mortality—the dust we all eventually become, the trauma of losing flesh and blood – the most notable horror and dread is directed towards the

“creature” that Voldemort has become. In his exploration of Voldemort’s quest for immortality, “Harry Potter and the Aims of Transhumanism,” John Dunne describes both posthumanism and transhumanism, contemporary movements that attempt to use technology to prolong human life. In the essay, he equates Voldemort’s attempts at immortality to transhumanism,⁴³ concluding that “Harry Potter is a decidedly anti-transhumanist text” (65). Dunne contends that “the physical descriptors of Voldemort’s new body, as well as the grotesque images of him as baby-like at key points in the narrative, are physiognomic of his character and lack of moral formation” (63). While Dunne is no doubt correct in asserting that Voldemort’s appearance presents outwardly and internal reality, the way that Rowling carefully demonstrates how he came to look this way suggest moral degradation, rather than a lack of morality from the beginning.

In his encounters with Lord Voldemort, Harry frequently experiences not just fear, which would be natural when confronting a mortal enemy, but revulsion because Voldemort’s pursuit of deathlessness forces the Dark Lord into a precarious state of permanent abjection. Nowhere is this clearer than in Harry’s penultimate encounter with Lord Voldemort in the quasi-limbo of King’s Cross after Harry apparent death. While Harry wanders about, getting his bearings, he first becomes aware of a noise, which he perceives as “the small soft thumpings of something that flapped, flailed, and struggled. It was a pitiful noise, and yet also slightly indecent” (*Deathly Hallows* 706). Eventually Harry discovers *something* that has “the form of a small, naked child, curled on the

⁴³ The argument, while interesting, is an imperfect analogy. For example, he compares the creation of horcruxes to creating a digital recording of an individual’s consciousness as a way to achieve a limited form of immortality. While the parallel works, to some extent with the diary, in that Riddle is able to talk to Ginny Weasley from beyond the grave, the similarities are otherwise pretty limited. It is, however, a fascinating glimpse into these two movements.

ground, its skin raw and rough, flayed-looking, and it lay shuddering under a seat where it had been left, unwanted, stuffed out of sight, struggling for breath” (706). While neither Harry nor Dumbledore, appearing now apparently in spirit form, acknowledge directly that the thing under the bench is Voldemort’s soul, the description clearly alludes to his appearance, prior to his rebirth, in *Goblet of Fire*. Harry even thinks of it not as a human being, but as a “little creature” (707), echoing the wording he himself uses when seeing Voldemort’s physical form for the first time. Jonathan and Jerry Walls focus much of their attention on this moment in their essay “Beyond Godric’s Hollow: Life and Death and the Search for Meaning.” There, they draw the conclusion that “it is Voldemort’s misguided fear of death that has driven him to the unspeakable acts that have obliterated any trace of goodness within him, but it is because of these choices that Voldemort now actually has reason to fear death” (251). Dumbledore seems to make this point very clear, when he looks to the raw creature under the bench and pointedly says to Harry, “you have less to fear from returning here [by which he means to death] than he does” (*Deathly Hallows* 722). Dumbledore’s words might hint at some sort of moral judgment that now awaits Voldemort, but Rowling never directly references either heaven or hell. Still, according to Wall and Wall, this moment is telling: “The creature at the station is saddled with an unchanging destiny. It represents the culmination of his development of character, a process that is complete. Voldemort no longer merely did evil: he had become evil” (253). The irony is that the more Voldemort chases after physical immortality, the weaker his spirit, his soul, becomes until it is left, seemingly abandoned. Rowling thus very clearly ends Dumbledore’s last lesson with Harry by reinforcing the futility of fighting

against death by presenting Voldemort's grasping for deathlessness as not just dreadful and disturbing, but potentially damning.

Here, however, it must be noted that Rowling establishes in the very first book of the Harry Potter series that physical immortality is possible with the introduction of the Philosopher's Stone (renamed the Sorcerer's Stone for American readers). In *Literatures of Alchemy in Medieval and Early Modern England*, Eoin Bentick notes that "whilst the heart of the alchemical promise has always been the transmutation of base metals into gold – and later the creation of the elixir of life – the realities of alchemy were necessarily more mundane" (2). Bentick argues that Carl Jung was "instrumental in cementing the notion that the true meaning of alchemy was an expression of universal human truth" (3). In her studies of classical and medieval alchemy, the Swiss scholar Marie-Louise von Franz, herself a Jungian psychoanalyst, arrived at the conclusion that the Philosopher's Stone was for the alchemists more of a metaphor than a tangible object. According to von Franz, medieval and Renaissance alchemists often drew from pre-Christian and pagan sources, but rather than focusing on the goal of physical immortality, they instead focused on achieving spiritual perfection by adhering to "the Wisdom of God" (189). Much like G. K. Chesterton, who in his work *Orthodoxy* details his attempts to arrive at spiritual truth outside of the Christian tradition only to find his way back to the church, alchemists of the Renaissance sought for answers outside of the established ecclesiastical paradigms only to find themselves seeking immortality through the emulation of Christ. In the philosophy that these alchemists developed, they stressed that the first step was to be accomplished through *nigredo*, which according to Franz begins with "a state of self-reflection" and ends with the death of self (147). In "The Two

Alchemists in Harry Potter,” Signe Cohen examines Voldemort’s quest for immortality in this context. According to Cohen, “Harry Potter and his archenemy Voldemort can be read as rival alchemists, one pursuing alchemy as a spiritual discipline and the other engaged in a purely material quest for physical immortality. Voldemort’s eventual defeat can be interpreted in light of his flawed understanding of the moral and spiritual side of the alchemical work” (206). Cohen argues that Voldemort is simply a poor alchemist perpetually stuck in the first stage of contemplating death; however, it seems more apt to say that Voldemort eschews alchemy altogether. While he does seek to use Nicholas Flammel’s stone to make the Elixir of Life and restore his physical form, rather importantly, he intends to take it by theft and force, if necessary. When Harry asks Dumbledore why Voldemort doesn’t simply create a Philosopher’s Stone of his own, Dumbledore counters to say it is because “Voldemort would have been entirely dependent on the Elixir, and if it ran out, or was contaminated, or if the Stone was stolen, he would die just like any other man. Voldemort likes to operate alone, remember. I believe that he would have found the thought of being dependent, even on the Elixir, intolerable” (*Half-Blood Prince* 502). Taken one step further, Voldemort has no desire to pursue the spiritual path necessary to achieve the moral enlightenment that alchemists sought, because it is rooted in Christ’s model of selflessness. In the case of Nicholas and Pernelle Flammel, the desire for longevity does not appear to be born of selfishness nor is it truly a desire for deathlessness. While we are never told why he created the Sorcerer’s Stone in the first place, after it is nearly stolen by Voldemort, they agree to destroy it, apparently without hesitation, and accept that it is now time to die without fear, viewing it instead as a welcome rest. Thus, as Wolosky points out, “Voldemort is the only character in the books

who desires immortality, resolutely trying to overcome death (194). If anything, Voldemort should be seen as an *anti-chemist*, seeking after physical immortality while caring nothing for the state of his soul. Rather than seeking spiritual perfection, Voldemort relishes his moral turpitude, delighting in the pain and suffering that he causes others.

That Voldemort does not perceive his own transformed nature as problematic, despite how increasingly inhuman and demonic he appears, is in part explained by the way he perceives traditional morality. Professor Quirrell tells Harry that he was once “a foolish young man then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 293). Since Voldemort himself later claims that he and Quirrell share body and mind, there is little reason to question that this is a true accounting of how Voldemort perceives morality. He sees himself as being above other people. In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger argues that dying is one of the things that makes us human. One of the central tenants of Heideggerian philosophy is that only when we develop a healthy view of ourselves as Being-toward death are we able to be authentically human. As Walls and Walls point out, “Heidegger didn’t advise that we should morbidly reflect about death until we’re depressed, but, rather, that we should come to terms with death and the limitations it implies, so that we can move into our remaining future” (247). From a young age, Voldemort identifies dying with weakness, which explains his “intense craving for power and his paradoxical ability to harm himself in securing it” (Williams and Kellner 136). Instead of fearing his transformation, Voldemort seems to believe it is instead proof of his greatness, that he has “pushed the

boundaries of magic further, perhaps, than they have ever been pushed” (*Half-Blood Prince* 441). Voldemort, who has no desire to be like other humans, subject to their physical and emotional frailties, seeks to separate himself from humanity in every way. Rather than understanding that his physical transformation serves as a warning that he is imperiling his soul, Voldemort’s narcissism would more likely lead him to view his alterations as proof he was moving closer to his imagined, idealized state.⁴⁴

Of course, the effect of his countenance on others might also explain why Voldemort might revel in his changed appearance, given that he routinely employs fear as his primary weapon against his foes. If Dumbledore is correct, and Voldemort really is afraid of dead bodies, then Kristeva’s theories of the abject help to explain why the Dark Lord drapes himself in the imagery of what he fears most. Kristeva suggests that the revulsion people feel at seeing a corpse is strangely paired with a sort of morbid fascination, which explains the appeal of horror. Thus, he surrounds himself with witches and wizards who term themselves Death Eaters, employs the Dark Mark—an emerald green skull with a snake protruding from its mouth—and even utilizes Inferi, “dead bodies that have been bewitched to do a Dark Wizard’s bidding” (*Half-Blood Prince* 62). The trap that he lays for anyone who would attempt to take Slytherin’s Locket, one of the intentional horcruxes that he makes, serves both as a strong example of the way that Rowling employs the abject to create a sense of horror and dread for the reader, but it also serves to showcase Voldemort’s own fears of the dead. When Harry attempts to bring

⁴⁴ In *Narcissism: The Pursuit of Perfection*, Arnold Rothstein points out that many people who suffer from narcissism are unable to view themselves with any degree of critical perspective.

Dumbledore water after the older wizard has drunk the cursed potion in which the locket is submerged, he is stopped. Turning his gaze back to the water, Harry sees that

A slimy white hand had gripped his wrist, and the creature to whom it belonged was pulling him, slowly, backward across the rock. The surface of the lake was no longer mirror-smooth: it was churning, and everywhere Harry looked, white heads and hands were emerging from the dark water, men and women and children with sunken, sightless eyes were moving toward the rock: an army of the dead rising from the black water. (575)

Adding to the already horrific scene is the fact that many of the spells Harry knows simply have no effect on the Inferi, and he is only saved from certain doom by Dumbledore regaining his senses. Voldemort seeks to weaponize fear, and in so doing, employs that which he himself fears the most: being dragged down into death just like everyone else.

To some extent, Voldemort is defeated because of his hubris. Just that he cannot accept that he is human, and therefore must die, he cannot fathom that anyone would ever be clever enough to deduce that he has created numerous horcruxes, little on find and destroy each of them. In the end, though, his quest for power proves meaningless. When he and Harry have their final confrontation in Hogwarts castle, he has been rendered all but powerless by Harry's sacrifice. The same old magic that Lily Potter invoked to save her son so many years before now protects everyone that Harry was willing to lay down his life for. In those last moments, Voldemort is offered a chance by his enemy. Harry tells him to "be a man . . . try . . . try for some remorse" (*Deathly Hallows* 741). Despite Dumbledore's suggestion "that Voldemort is now so immersed in evil, and these crucial parts of himself have been detached for so long, he does not feel as we do," Harry nonetheless appeals to his humanity (*Half-Blood Prince* 508). He gives Voldemort both a

chance and a choice. As Wall and Wall point out, however, Voldemort “obstinately refuses to turn from his self-imposed path to perdition” (253). Defiant to the end, he resorts to violence, despite Harry’s warnings, and in a flash, “Tom Riddle hit the floor with a mundane finality, his body feeble and shrunken, the white hands empty, the snakelike face vacant and unknowing. Voldemort was dead, killed by his own rebounding curse” (*Deathly Hallows* 744). Rowling’s choice of phrasing here is telling. It is not celebratory language that she employs, nor does she aggrandize Harry in this moment. Instead, the death of Tom Riddle is described as “mundane,” as unexceptional, because in the end, he is still just a man, and as has been true since ancient times with Aristotle’s famous syllogism, all men are mortal.

While Rowling very clearly intends Voldemort to be the epitome of evil in her story, like Tolkien, Rowling does not believe that Evil can be defeated by mortal agents. In *The Wisdom of Harry Potter*, Edmund Kern suggests that through the novels, Rowling “provides not only the promise of triumph over evil, but also guidance on how to meet it” (26). Voldemort is but *one* evil of this world. And while he is driven by a desire for deathlessness that is rooted in his own fear of death, it must equally be noted that Voldemort is, as Dumbledore points out, completely lacking in love. As Maria Escalas-Ruiz points out in “Death Culture, Literary References and Postmodern Sacred Elements in Harry Potter as a Transmedia Franchise,” Voldemort “may be conceived as the opposite of love” (138). No matter how many followers and lackeys he might surround himself with, the Death Eaters are not his friends, and while they might share his goal of gaining dominance and power, at least so much as it suits their own ends, they are most certainly not his equals. Though he might bestow upon himself a grand title, he is not

lordly in the sense that he is noble and caring for his followers. He cares for no one but himself. Escalas-Ruiz argues that “Voldemort is outside a significant narrative truth in the Rowling franchise: if love gives meaning to life as part of this ethos, Voldemort violates this truth by being unable to love or to be loved” (138). While it is not certain whether or not he is truly unable to love or simply chooses not to is a matter of debate.⁴⁵ Escala-Ruiz is, however, completely wrong when she says that he is unloved. There is, at the very least, one person in the Wizarding World with the strength required to do as commanded in Matthew 5:44, and love his enemy—the very boy who Voldemort tries and fails to slay so ardently throughout the series: The Boy Who Lived.

Despite the monicker of “The Dark Lord,” Voldemort has less in common with Sauron than he does with Byron’s Manfred or Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus. He is a mortal man, raging against his own limitations. Faced with the existential crisis that we all must face—the realization that we are mortal—he tries to deny his humanity and seeks supernatural means to forestall the inevitable. Believing that power is all that is needed to conquer death, he tries to amass worldly power, ignoring any impediment to his ambition. People have no value to him as individuals, and thus he feels no compulsion to treat others with dignity or humanity, which allows him to flaunt conventional morality. In this way, he becomes almost a twisted parody of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, allowing his pride to blind him to the possibility of life everlasting as a spiritual pursuit. But unlike his literary predecessors, he is not dragged to hell for his hubris. He simply dies, like all men

⁴⁵ Rowling has been misquoted as saying that Voldemort cannot feel love because he was born of a loveless union. What she actually said was that “he cannot understand love because he was born of a loveless union.” (Anelli). She has also suggested in interviews, however, that in taking Harry’s blood, he gained enough love to give him a small glimmer that he might be saved by remorse, but of course, he chose otherwise (Viera).

must. In his diminished state, where no one can help him despite their desire to do so, there can only be oblivion. What awaits him after is left unanswered, but the text suggests that all his work to make himself deathless has accomplished is to negate any chance he might have at true immortality of the soul.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE MASTER OF DEATH

In 2001, J. K. Rowling appeared in a BBC Christmas special titled “Harry Potter and Me,” in which she discussed the phenomenal popularity of the then still in progress series. While it had long been public knowledge that Rowling had planned for a seven-book series, Rowling notes during this special that “death is an extremely important theme throughout all seven books. I would say possibly the most important theme.” At the time the special aired, three books of the series were yet to be written, but with the publication of the seventh book, *Deathly Hallows*, Rowling’s assertions about the thematic importance of death became much clearer. In the final novel of the series, Rowling introduces the concept of becoming the master of death. Within the wizarding world, it is believed that anyone who unites three legendary items, the titular Deathly Hallows, can become the master of death, but a more complex, philosophical view of mastering death emerges when the series is considered in its totality. To some extent, the novels are a bildungsroman, tracing Harry’s ethical and spiritual maturation, which for Rowling includes an acceptance that death is the natural end of life, but the novels also position Harry as the ultimate exemplar of Rowling’s view of how we should approach death, one which is rooted in Christian ethics and rejects the popular, self-oriented philosophies of the twentieth century.

Death features prominently throughout the series of novels, so it is unsurprising that critics frequently have chosen to examine the ways Rowling addresses mortality. “Controversial Content: Is Harry Potter Harmful to Children?” by Deborah Taub and Heather Severtay-Seib (2002) was one of the first to examine death in terms of ethics, but

their work makes a somewhat puzzling claim that the depictions of death presented in Harry Potter are rooted in evil and violence:

Death cannot and should not be equated with these concepts. Death is not 'dark' in and of itself. The inappropriate representation in Western society of these ideas as consistently merged has and is likely to continue to perpetuate the mistaken notion that death is some kind of abnormality of our existence: an evil force. In reality, death is the inevitable end for all living beings. It is a natural stage in development. (23)

While Taub and Severtay-Sieb are correct in their assertion that most of the deaths presented in the series are a result of evil actions, their argument fails to acknowledge that most of this evil is brought about by one man's obsessive quest to *not die*. Auba Llompart Pons counters Taub and Severtay-Sieb by pointing out that Rowling examines death "in a myriad of ways: it is represented as a physical reality and as a metaphor; as a result of violence and evil, but also as euthanasia and sacrifice; and as tragic and terrifying, but benign and natural, at the same time" (63). Pons also notes that there are many elements of the text where death is "depicted as preferable to an undignified life," and argues that the text serves a didactic purpose in helping children come to terms with death (65). Likewise, Peter Ciaccio argues against Taub and Severtay-Sieb's reading, arguing that "the way Rowling deals with death in Harry Potter brings instead a healthy message: one cannot remove death from life, but one should live taking death into serious consideration" (40). Strangely though, much of the critical examinations of the text that explore the importance of the theme of death in the series divorce those examinations from the character of Harry himself. To some extent, this can be attributed to much of the criticism predating the publication of the seventh and final book of the series. In order to fully understand Rowling's philosophy about death and dying, it is crucial to look at

Harry's burgeoning understanding of what it means to die well, how that ultimately ties to living well, and how Rowling positions him to become the master of death.

Despite charges of Satanism and teaching children witchcraft from the public sector against the books, there is considerable serious scholarship devoted to examining the Christian underpinnings of the Harry Potter series. While works such as John Killinger's *The Life, Death, and Resurrection of Harry Potter and God, the Devil, and Harry Potter*, or John Granger's *Looking for God in Harry Potter* present popular examinations of the text in a Christian context, more rigorous academic works have likewise explored the influences of Christian philosophy on Rowling's work. Dan McVeigh's 2002 article "Is Harry Potter Christian?" was one of the first to address the burgeoning controversy about the books and turn a more critical lens to the series. Writing about the first four books, as they were the only ones published at time, he concludes that the only way that Rowling's work could be interpreted as espousing anything other than a Christian ethos would require "an almost inconceivable turn of plot to turn Voldemort into either a conqueror or a villain" (211). Perhaps more importantly, as McVeigh notes, elements of Christian symbolism are present throughout the Harry Potter series. McVeigh describes these as being "almost subterranean," by which he means that Rowling uses arcane or little-known Christian symbology, giving the example that the phoenix is not universally acknowledged by modern readers as symbolizing the Resurrection (209). By the seventh book, however, Rowling makes the references far more obvious. As Beatrice Groves notes, "*Deathly Hallows* contains more explicitly Christian imagery than earlier books" (64). Some of the elements are presented humorously, such as George Weasley joking that he feels "saintlike" after losing an ear

because now “I’m holey” (70). There are, however, specific, and often serious, if not reverent, references to Christianity in this text: Harry and Hermione arrive in Godric’s Hollow just in time to see the parishioners leaving a midnight mass on Christmas Eve. Harry carves a cross on the tree where he buries Mad-Eye Moody’s magical eye, and there are Bible verses engraved on the tombstones of Harry’s parents as well as that of Ariana Dumbledore. Rowling has even acknowledged in interviews that she had deliberately downplayed the Christian elements in earlier novels in part to avoid spoiling the end of the series.⁴⁶

And yet, there are critics who challenge whether or not the Harry Potter series truly offers a Christian understanding of death. In her article “The Last Enemy: Harry Potter and Western Anxiety about Death,” Christina Hitchcock challenges Rowling’s work as fundamentally antithetical to Christian doctrine about death and the resurrection to come. Hitchcock views Dumbledore’s statement that no spell can reawaken the dead as Rowling rejecting the notion of Resurrection, and ultimately concludes that Rowling “for all her apparent confidence in the fitness of death, is in the end unwilling to look behind the curtain and confront its finality” (82). For Hitchcock, it seems, the only way that the Harry Potter series could wholly address death from a Christian perspective would be for Harry to harrow hell and ultimately destroy death itself. What Hitchcock fails to consider, however, is that Harry is not intended to be Christ. However Christ-like his actions might be, he is neither the literal messiah nor is he Aslan from Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*.

⁴⁶ Rowling first revealed this fear in an interview with Jonathan Petre for the *Telegraph* in 2007.

For that matter, Harry himself is not a Christian character, in that the young wizard does not have any explicitly stated religious beliefs. Having been raised by the Dursleys, who are every bit as rooted in the materialistic⁴⁷ world as is Lord Voldemort, he has apparently had no formal religious education. Harry's ignorance is, at times, readily evident, such as when he misinterprets the inscription on his parents' tombstone: "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (*Deathly Hallows* 328). Rather than recognizing it as a Bible verse (1 Corinthians 15:26), Harry is initially distressed, reading it as "a Death Eater idea" (328). Even when Hermione corrects him, to explain that it means "living beyond death," Harry still does not wholly understand, suggesting further that he has almost no grasp on traditional religious beliefs. Interestingly, then, Rowling constructs a character who becomes Christ-like without the character ever acknowledging the Christian faith. While a Christian understanding of death and dying is central to the story, Rowling's choice not to have Harry espouse the Christian faith alienated many who would have otherwise embraced her work. In "Christian Perspectives on Harry Potter: Tool of Satan or Christian Parable?" Amie Senland and Elizabeth Vozzola point to their own research which suggest suggests that individual receptivity to the Harry Potter series is often a matter of whether or not the ethics and beliefs espoused in the series resonate with the individual reader, noting that those who are more fiercely traditional and evangelical are less likely to have a positive view of the series, simply because these

⁴⁷ The Dursleys are materialistic in both senses of the word. They seem obsessed with the accumulation of material goods, a trait that Dudley displays in the very first book when he bemoans how few gifts he receives (despite having 37). They are also philosophically materialistic in that they literally attempt to deny the magical world, which Rowling seems to position closer to the spiritual world, even hinting that it is somewhat adjacent to the real world with Diagon Alley. Likewise, they seem to have absolutely no interest in spiritual matters.

individuals tend towards a “worldview where God defines morality and moral purity is obtained by following the divine moral code revealed through Scripture” (158). Senland and Vozzola’s work also revealed, however, that younger readers who had been raised in Christian households were more likely to point towards Harry’s moral choices, recognizing that these closely aligned with their own values. In many ways then, Rowling’s choice to not have Harry embrace a particular religion most likely helped to broaden the appeal of the character, in that he could stand as a more universal exemplar of someone whose actions are informed by Western Christianity without ever endorsing a particular faith.

Despite being known throughout the Wizarding World as “The Boy Who Lived,” Harry becomes the master of death by emulating the model of Christ and offering himself up as a sacrifice to save the world. Just as Christ was motivated by love, so too is Harry. Of course, Harry does not knowingly follow in Christ’s footsteps. Instead, he is following the example given to him by his parents, who laid down their lives hoping to spare his, as well as his many mentors and friends who have all enacted the Scriptural teaching espoused in John 15:13: “Greater love has no one that this, that a person will lay down his life for his friends” (*New American Standard*). Given how many characters in this series are shown willing to sacrifice themselves for a greater purpose and to save others, the importance of willingly dying for others out of love cannot be incidental. Rowling intends this to be one of the major themes of her novels, particularly when she likewise emphasizes that the great power Harry possesses is love, as evidenced by his conversation with Dumbledore in *Order of the Phoenix*, and puts such great emphasis on

individual choices as the main determinant of character with Dumbledore's maxim choices, not abilities, reveal who we really are.

What Rowling seems to be suggesting is the need for ethical mindfulness over strict adherence to a particular systemic approach to morality. As I will discuss later in this chapter, Harry might make bad choices on numerous occasions, but apart from a few outliers, he is almost always going to make the ethical choice. As has been frequently noted by critics, Harry has a certain casual disregard for rules, but the rules that Harry tends to ignore are those that impose restrictions on his ability to act when his own conscience would demand otherwise. For instance, when Harry teaches his peers to use magic in *Order of the Phoenix*, it is in open defiance of Ministry of Magic educational decrees, but having witnessed Voldemort's return first-hand, he knows how essential these skills will be for his friends to learn in order to keep themselves safe in an increasingly dangerous world.

Part of the problem is that many of the rules he resists often do not make logical sense. As Aaron Schwabach argues in "Harry Potter and the Unforgivable Curses," the rule of law in the Wizarding World is often inconsistent, both in reasoning and enforcement, resulting in "an ad hoc and inconsistent approach to justice" (350). While Schwabach is more concerned with the legal ramifications of using certain spells, the Wizarding World is rife with examples that show how utterly flawed their legal system is, ranging from nearly being expelled because a house elf performed magic at Privet Drive during his second year at Hogwarts to having a genuine case of underage (if unintentional) magic being completely swept under the rug the next. In *Order of the Phoenix*, when Harry lawfully uses underage magic in self-defense, he is brought before

a full wizarding tribunal, and that, only after, being threatened with having his wand confiscated and destroyed without due process. Quite the contrary to Farah Mendlesohn's assertion that Rowling (like Tolkien and Lewis) has predicated her work on the idea that "fairness and happiness can best be achieved when rules are obeyed" (160), Harry is forced to navigate a world where the laws can be just or unjust, depending on the whims of those tasked with enforcing them and how they are disposed towards him at any given time. Even at Hogwarts, where the rules are ostensibly in place because they serve a purpose, there is a degree of flexibility. For example, Harry *is* given special dispensation to play Quidditch his first year immediately after engaging in rule-breaking; however, the text links this to an ethical choice: Harry breaks the rule of no unsupervised flying in order to prevent Malfoy from destroying Neville's property. While no mention of this mitigating factor is made by Professor McGonagall, in rewarding Harry for his rule breaking Rowling subverts that should be traditional notions of morality, suggesting instead that following the rules is not always the same as making the correct, moral choice.

Through the mouthpiece of Albus Dumbledore, Rowling articulates her belief in the importance of choice. At the end of *Chamber of Secrets*, Dumbledore states, "it is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities" (333). In part, these words are intended to assuage Harry's growing discomfiture that he and Voldemort share a number of characteristics and abilities, such as the ability to speak with snakes. More than that, though, they do highlight a fundamental difference between abilities and choices. In his article "Choices vs. Abilities," Gregory Bassham points out that abilities are "*morally neutral capacities* that can be used wisely or unwisely, ethically or

unethically” (164, italics in original). The ability to use magic is, after all, an ability, one that is possessed by both Harry and Voldemort. How they, or any other witch or wizard for that matter, chooses to use it is what matters most. *Chamber of Secrets* depicts witches like McGonagall using her abilities to educate students and Professor Sprout using her abilities to grow mandrake roots in an effort to cure those who have been petrified, while at the same time presenting an immoral opportunist like Gilderoy Lockhart who has used his one ability to steal the memories of other, more able witches and wizards and pass them off as his own for monetary gain. Bassham concludes by stating, “our choices reveal most clearly our qualities of character and what we care about most deeply” (170).

For Rowling, there seems to be no greater choice than in how an individual chooses to face death. Perhaps no singular instance emphasizes this more than how she introduces the concept of the Deathly Hallows into the eponymous novel. In the “Story of the Three Brothers,” a fairy tale that exists within the wizarding world, three brothers are confronted by death himself after they use magic to avoid drowning in a river. Death then gives each brother a choice of a prize. These three prizes are the Deathly Hallows: the Elder Wand, the Resurrection Stone, and the Cloak of Invisibility. What is then demonstrated is that the first two brothers choose poorly, in part because of their own moral failings. The first brother, the story relates, “was a combative man,” and “asked for a wand more powerful than any in existence; a wand that must always win duels for its owner, a wand worthy of a wizard that had conquered Death” (407). He is then murdered after bragging about the wand. Likewise, the second brother, “who was an arrogant man” who wants to “humiliate Death still further,” asks for “the power to recall others from Death” (407). He receives the Resurrection Stone, but when he pulls back his fiancée

from death, he realizes that she is suffering because she does not belong in the world of mortals any longer, so he commits suicide to join her (409). Only the youngest brother, “the humblest and also the wisest,” lives a long life without tragedy (408). The youngest brother gains the Invisibility Cloak, which he passes on as an heirloom before “he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly” (409). Both choices made by the older two brothers are an attempt to subvert the natural order of things. The older brother wants power to deal out death to others, while the second brother wants to be able to undo death itself. Only the younger brother is shown as accepting death as natural and choosing to die, despite the suggestion that the cloak might have kept him from death for as long as he chose to employ it. What is most interesting is that Rowling emphasizes that the youngest brother is both the wisest of the three and the humblest. Rowling has offhandedly acknowledged that that story of the three brothers was inspired by Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale*,⁴⁸ but Allison Gulley notes that while many have dismissed the similarities between the two as mostly superficial, more scrutiny is warranted: “Rowling’s morality tale of the three brothers is framed by a quest that, while not strictly a pilgrimage, contains many elements in common with the medieval practice” (192). Gulley points out that one of the key features of the pilgrimage is “self-abnegation and abandonment of familiar ties” (193). Gulley views Harry’s quest as likewise serving as a pilgrimage, therefore reading his tendency to self-abnegate as a function of the journey rather than a matter of personal choice and character. Given how much Rowling emphasizes choice in the series, even pointing out that Harry and Voldemort share such

⁴⁸ The initial acknowledgement came during a livechat hosted by Bloomsbury immediately following the publication of *Deathly Hallows*, a transcript of which can be found on the Accio Quote website.

similar backgrounds but that their paths diverged almost entirely because of the choices they made, Gulley's failure to connect back to Harry's character seems a mistake. Gulley is correct in that Rowling does seem to emphasize self-abnegation, particularly given that Voldemort's actions are show shown as diametrically opposed to Harry's and are based wholly on self-interest, but it is the choices each of them makes throughout life that truly matters most.

Until the revelation of the existence of the Deathly Hallows, Harry is wholly devoted to the quest of hunting down and destroying the Horcruxes to bring about Voldemort's downfall. After his visit to Xenophilius Lovegood's home, Harry briefly considers abandoning that quest in favor of seeking out the Deathly Hallows when he comes to the realization that he will have to choose either horcruxes or hallows. Putting aside his own desire to obtain the hallows, he focuses his attention on the horcruxes. In a way, though, Harry had been put on the path to seeking out the Deathly Hallows long before the seventh book. On Christmas morning, when he is only eleven years old, Harry receives the Cloak as a Christmas present, along with a cryptic note that states, "Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 202). At the time, Harry has no idea who has returned the cloak to him nor how special it is. Rowling only calls attention to its unique qualities in *Deathly Hallows* when Xenophilius points out that all other cloaks are only partly successful in providing invisibility or else lose potency within the lifetime of the owner. Harry's mysterious benefactor is revealed to be Dumbledore himself, who admits "your father happened to leave it in my possession" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 299). While the cloak is Harry's birthright and a family heirloom, Dumbledore's decision to give it to Harry, when we

later learn that he too is aware that it is a Deathly Hallow, must be seen as meaningful, particularly once Harry learns just how calculating his former mentor had been. He is not just making sure that Harry gets his inheritance; instead, he is setting Harry on the path to achieve what he himself will be unable to do—become the master of death—because of an ill-fated choice of his own. Although Dumbledore is capable of a degree of self-abnegation, as evidenced by his frequent refusals to take up the position of Minister of Magic, the older wizard is still seen as making foolish choices at times, choices which are rooted in a form of hubris. The most notable of these is his headlong rush to possess the Resurrection Stone, an action which the reader and Harry learn about after the fact but which has mortal consequences for the usually wise headmaster, since in his haste, Dumbledore triggered a protective curse on the Stone. While Snape is able to forestall the worst effects of the curse, Dumbledore's folly leaves him with a withered arm. Worse, he is slowly dying at a time when Harry will need him most.

Narrative conventions might seem to suggest that Harry would be able to become the master of death simply because he is, in the words of the *Daily Prophet*, the “Chosen One” or due to birthright. In “Crowning the King: Harry Potter and the Construction of Authority,” Farah Mendlesohn argues that the central plot of the Harry Potter series is “that of the returning prince, deprived of his heritage by the actions of the usurper, who has come to reclaim his throne, and with it, herald a new age of happiness” (162). Much of Mendlesohn's argument is predicated on the assertion that Harry himself lacks inherited power and is instead frequently bestowed with gifts that empower him: his wand, his broomstick, even his cloak. At first glance, this is an almost tempting argument to follow. After all, Harry does inherit the cloak, which could suggest that the Potters

have a long and established connection to the Deathly Hallows. Likewise, Voldemort does, in a way, seek to become master of death, at least as he understands the concept, though the methods he uses to achieve mastery are both unethical and incapable of giving him the sort of immortality he seeks.⁴⁹ Apart from these superficial elements, however, the argument falters. Harry's talent on a broomstick is not a result of the broom, but his own ability, and his skills in Defense Against the Dark Arts are unrivalled, even by Hermione. While Harry might not be the most academically gifted of wizards in all areas, he is so talented in fighting against the Dark Arts that he even takes on the role of teacher in *Order of the Phoenix*, providing practical lessons to his peers when Dolores Umbridge refused to do more than simply teach theory. There is no suggestion, however, that his skill is the result of his wand being better than anyone else's, and the unique quality that it does have, sharing a core with Voldemort's wand, is revealed in *Deathly Hallows* to provide no additional benefit whatsoever. Far from being the Excalibur of wands, it is simply just another tool. Admittedly, the one material gift that does have unique qualities is the Invisibility Cloak, but there's no indication that anyone in Harry's family remained aware of its significance. All that we are told is that after James showed it to Dumbledore, he "asked to borrow it, to examine it" (*Deathly Hallows* 714). When Dumbledore realizes it is "immensely old [and] perfect in every respect" he knows it is one of the Deathly Hallows, but the Potters die before he can reveal that information to them (715). Harry is the rightful owner of the cloak, and Dumbledore duly returns it to him once he rejoins the magical world. Simply possessing the cloak, however, does not

⁴⁹ See previous chapter.

automatically make Harry the heir to the title of master of death, it simply means he has one of the required objects.

Choice and moral character appear to be far more important determiners of who can become the master of death than familial lineage. Rowling calls the reader's attention to this point numerous times throughout the series. At the end of *Order of the Phoenix*, Dumbledore finally reveals to Harry that the real reason that Voldemort attempted to kill him as a child was due to a prophecy. Although the prophecy reported back to Voldemort was incomplete, it foretold that the one who would be born capable of defeating him would "have power the Dark Lord knows not" (841). Voldemort slays the Potters, and attempts to kill Harry, not because the child is some sort of figurative wizardly prince, as Mendlesohn suggests, but because the Dark Lord fears him as a rival. He fears for the potential power he will one day have. Harry also learns that the prophecy might not have even been about him at all—that it could have equally applied to Neville Longbottom—but that Voldemort had to make a choice, and in that moment, he chose Harry. Harry is therefore marked (literally) as his rival in that moment, not because the prophecy demanded it, but because Voldemort heard the words and acted on them. In numerous ways, this scene, or one remarkably similar to it, plays out at the end of each of the seven novels. In almost every novel, Harry has a personal meeting with Dumbledore, wherein the elder wizard essentially codifies and reinforces the meaning that Harry (and by extension the reader) should draw from the events of the novel, and in each instance, choice is central to the discussion at hand. At the end of *Sorcerer's Stone*, Dumbledore discusses Nicholas and Perenelle Flamel's decision to put their affairs in order and then voluntarily die from old age so as to not risk the Sorcerer's Stone falling into the wrong

hands. In *Chamber of Secrets*, he comments on the similarities between Harry and Tom Riddle, pointing out to Harry that they are different because of their decisions. Harry's choice to spare Pettigrew is central to their discussion in *Prisoner of Azkaban*, and there are protracted discussions about Voldemort's choices in *Order of the Phoenix* and *Half-Blood Prince*. Even death does not prevent Dumbledore from returning to visit Harry in the limbo-like King's Cross, where even there, they discuss the importance of choices, including whether or not Harry will choose to go on into death. The one book that breaks the pattern only does it somewhat, in that Harry does not have a private meeting with Dumbledore at the end of *Goblet of Fire*. There, the private meeting is with Barty Crouch Jr, the imposter pretending to be Mad-Eye Moody, but even that discussion centers on choice. Rowling adheres rigidly to this pattern because it serves a rhetorical and didactic purpose. Just as the repeated deaths of Harry's parents, friends, and mentors serves to reiterate and exemplify the importance of a good death, these private moments with Dumbledore serve to reiterate and exemplify the importance of choice.

As much as Rowling emphasizes moral choice as a key component of Harry's development into the master of death, she makes it clear that these choices are shaped by Harry's ability to love. In *Order of the Phoenix*, when Dumbledore is first explaining the prophecy to Harry, he comments that Harry was not "a pampered little prince, but as normal a boy as I could have hoped for under the circumstances" (837), alluding to the fact that Harry had not been well treated by the Dursleys. Shortly thereafter, he reveals that the power the prophecy speaks of is the ability to love. Harry cannot conceive of a way that this as particularly beneficial tool for battling Voldemort, and in *Half-Blood Prince*, when he and Dumbledore finally learn the full extent of Voldemort's evil, he

makes his skepticism about love quite plain. Dumbledore then tells him that his ability to love *is* important, noting that “given everything that has happened to you, [it] is a great and remarkable thing” (509). Dumbledore is, of course, referring to the loss of his parents and friends, but he also seems to be calling out the Dursleys as well. In “The Past is Present and Future: Recurring Violence and Remaining Human in J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter Series,” Alaa Alghamdi argues that Rowling is representing generational trauma through the death of Harry’s parents and his lingering connection to Voldemort. Likewise, Alghamdi points out that Harry “remains human” while Voldemort does not (73). The way in which he retains his humanity is in choosing to love. Rather than closing himself off to others, as Voldemort does, Harry maintains his friendships with others and treats individuals with kindness. What stands out, though, is that Harry shows almost none of the standard symptoms of child abuse, as defined by Stanford Medicine (“Signs & Symptoms of Abuse”). He shows no proclivity towards social withdrawal, nor does he display symptoms of phobias, bed wetting, hyperactivity, or speech disorders. His behavior is not regressive for his age, he has no notable eating issues, and he is not prone to self-harm or to harming his pet owl, Hedwig. The only traits of abuse that Harry displays are nightmares and difficulty concentrating, but Rowling ties those specifically to Voldemort’s actions, such as the nightmares about Cedric Diggory’s death.

If Rowling intended for the story to represent generational trauma, it would seem far more likely that she would have focused on the Dursleys and the effect that their actions had upon Harry, but she suggests that Harry is better adapted than Dudley. Rather than dwelling on his loss and the unfairness of his living conditions, Harry instead looks optimistically towards new opportunities. Rowling never explicitly makes the connection

for the reader but given Dumbledore's insistence that Harry is special because he can still feel love after all that has happened to him, it seems that she is suggesting that by choosing love over hate, Harry has shielded himself from any lingering effects that he might have otherwise endured by his mistreatment. Contrary to Mendlesohn's insistence that Harry is not a convincing portrayal of an abused and neglected child because he is "almost incomprehensibly, a nice child" (162), research into childhood trauma suggests that his disposition might not be an outlier. Gail Hornor's study, "Resilience in Children Recovering from Trauma," suggests that roughly 15% of all traumatized children are asymptomatic (23). Moreover, Hornor's study concludes that one of the key elements in developing resiliency in children is positivity. While it is possible that Harry is asymptomatic, it is far more likely that Rowling intends Harry's general wellbeing to be a result of positive choices that he has made. Why else is there such notable contrast between Harry's behavior in *Order of the Phoenix* and *Half-Blood Prince*? At the start of *Order of the Phoenix*, Harry is still in shock after Cedric Diggory's death. Worse still, he is cut off from the rest of the wizarding world at a time of high stress, and we see that Harry's positivity goes away. Instead of looking forward to rejoining his friends, he allows himself to wallow in self-pity and thus begins to lash out at others around him. Harry makes bad choices throughout this novel, picking a fight with Dudley, arguing with and yelling at his friends, blowing off occlumency lessons, and keeping vital information secret from the very people who are best positioned to help him—the adults that care so deeply for him. Even his choice to rush off to save Sirius is a bad choice, despite being rooted in love, because Harry is ill-informed as to the reality of the situation. In contrast, Harry's entire attitude shifts in *Half-Blood Prince*. He becomes more open with his

friends, turns to adults more often for advice and even imparts his fears and suspicions to them, rather than keeping them to himself. To some extent, this difference seems to be a result of the ending of *Order of the Phoenix*, where Dumbledore reminds him that feeling pain is part of being human and encourages him to feel it, rather than ignore it. He wants Harry to remember the reason why he feels so much pain at Sirius's passing is because he loves so deeply.⁵⁰

Although Dumbledore continually emphasizes love as Harry's source of strength in his fight against Voldemort, the older wizard also makes it clear that Harry has maintained his purity of heart and his humility. What Mendlesohn misidentifies as niceness is actually kindness and courtesy, virtues that make up part of the popular concept of chivalry. While the term once referred to the proper conduct of a knight on (and perhaps off) the battlefield, thanks in part to chivalric romances, in literature at least, the term has become a blanket term for a whole host of virtues, including bravery, kindness, courtesy and mercy, brought together in an explicitly Christian ideal. Harry might lack formal religious education, but he is shown, repeatedly, to be a model of chivalric behavior. Rowling emphasizes these connections to the chivalric romance in *Chamber of Secrets* when Harry reaches into the Sorting Hat and pulls forth the Sword of Godric Gryffindor, which seems a clear allusion to Arthur pulling the sword Excalibur from the stone. Throughout his young life, Harry has endured loss, abuse, scorn, suspicion, even torture. Yet through it all, he remains pure of heart and able to Dumbledore realizes early on that Harry is truly special, alluding to as much in *Sorcerer's Stone*.

⁵⁰ Or to borrow from *Wandavision*, "what is grief if not love persisting?"

There, he tells Harry that the Sorcerer's Stone is capable of providing "as much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all" (297). Despite knowing about these properties, Harry shows no desire for them, nor does he recognize how unique this makes him, in part because he is too young to understand at that moment. Only later, when he is older and more mature, does Dumbledore point this out to him:

In spite of all the temptations you have endured, all the suffering, you remained pure of heart, just as pure as you were at the age of eleven, when you stared into a mirror that reflected your heart's desire, and it showed you only the way to thwart Lord Voldemort, and not immortality or riches. Harry, have you any idea how few wizards could have seen what you saw in the mirror? Voldemort should have known then what he was dealing with, but he did not! (*Half-Blood Prince* 511)

Not once does Harry ever evidence a desire for immortality, because Rowling very clearly frames the desire for deathlessness to be rooted in selfish pride. To believe oneself worthy of immortality means to believe oneself better than the whole of humanity who have all gone before into death. More than that, to seek immortality is to deny our very humanity, and despite Harry's claim to not want to be human in *Order of the Phoenix* (824), he is still very much connected to other people. Alice Mills suggests that "Harry is characteristically reactive rather than being an initiator of action" (293). For Mills, this is problematic because she sees Harry as merely caught up in a grand scheme where he has little self-determination. On the contrary, Harry is still very much determining his own course. Yes, Rowling often depicts him as reacting to the world around him, but within those reactions, he still has the freedom to choose. What Rowling shows, repeatedly, is that Harry chooses to help others. He puts the good of others ahead of his own safety and self-interest because he is chivalrous.

Death is something that Harry faces multiple times throughout the series, and while the young wizard is never depicted as being eager to die, he is almost invariably shown to be willing to do so if necessary. When he and his friends erroneously believe that Severus Snape is attempting to steal the Sorcerer's Stone on Voldemort's behalf in Book 1 of the series, Harry feels compelled to action. Stopping Voldemort's return is of paramount concern to Harry, and when Hermione frets that he might be expelled for breaking Hogwarts' rules, Harry tells her, "if I get caught before I can get to the Stone, well, I'll have to back to the Dursleys and wait for Voldemort to find me there, it's only dying a bit later that I would have, because I'm never going over to the Dark Side" (270). At the age of eleven, Harry has already determined that it would be better to die than give in to evil. Almost instinctively, Harry grasps the concept that Voldemort cannot, that there are things worse than death. Harry's words are not just youthful bravado devoid of intent, for Harry shows his mettle the very first time he comes face-to-face with Voldemort by refusing to give the Dark Lord the Sorcerer's Stone in exchange for his life.

Harry's choice to try to save Ginny Wesley after she has been taken by Slytherin's Monster in *Chamber of Secrets* forces him to contend more directly with his own mortality. Once the mystery of Tom Riddle's diary has been solved, Harry confronts the basilisk, armed only with the Sword of Gryffindor and aid from Fawkes the Phoenix. In delivering a killing blow to the basilisk, one of its fangs pierces his arm, and in a matter of moments, Harry has almost completely succumbed to its effects (320). Harry does not, however, give in to bitterness at his own apparently imminent death. Instead, he is far more invested in whether or not Ginny Wesley will be safe, and even as Tom Riddle's spirit looms over him, taunting him: "You're dead, Harry Potter [. . .] I'm going to sit

here and watch you die,” Harry spends what might be his final moments thanking Fawkes for trying to save him (321). Harry is rescued from death by the healing powers of the Phoenix’s tears, but not before he thinks to himself, “If this is dying [. . .] it’s not so bad” (321). In a way, though, Harry still understands death almost as an abstraction at this point. He might believe himself close to death, but nothing in the text suggests that he has expended any mental energy in considering what that really means. He’s almost bemused by the idea, in part because he still has a child’s understanding of what it means to die. Accepting death is part of the maturation process, but in this instance, Harry does not fully seem to comprehend the significance of death. Once his wounds have closed with astonishing speed, thanks to Fawkes, Harry picks himself up and carries on, never dwelling on the fact that he came remarkably close to dying.

Cedric’s death at the end of the fourth book, however, is a pivotal moment in the series. Not only is Voldemort now restored to a flesh and blood body, but also it marks the first instance where Harry witnesses and processes what it means to die. Because his parents were taken from him at such an early age, Harry remembers almost nothing about the night it happened, but Cedric’s death fundamentally alters Harry’s perception of the world around him, symbolized by the fact that he can now see the thestrals, the mysterious, winged, skeletal horses that “only people who have seen death” are capable of seeing (*Order of the Phoenix* 154). If it were simply a matter of witnessing death, Harry should have always been able to see the thestrals, having watched as Voldemort killed his mother, but Rowling has since clarified her intentions via the Wizarding World website: “Being able to see Thestrals is a sign that the beholder has witnessed death, and gained an emotional understanding of what death means” (“Thestrals”). While he and

Cedric were more friendly rivals than devoted friends, the older boy's death nonetheless has a profound effect on Harry, in no small part because Harry has directly witnessed the transition from living person to lifeless body. While his shadow form is conjured forth from Voldemort's wand, Cedric has passed, irrevocably, onto what comes next, and even magic has no answers to that mystery. Thus, Harry has to contend with a newfound understanding of life, one where he realizes that he himself is "someone whose existence is finite" (Jowsey 79). In accepting this truth, Harry not only matures, but comes to a great understanding of his interconnectivity with all people. Granted, for much of *Order of the Phoenix*, Harry still seems to be wrestling with his emotional turmoil, but by the *Half-Blood Prince*, he shows remarkable growth, even finding it possible to empathize with Merope Gaunt and, at times, Tom Riddle himself.

Harry's apparent acceptance of death is challenged near the end of *Deathly Hallows*, for when he learns the full truth, that he has to walk knowingly and willingly to his death, his courage momentarily falters. Harry's previous youthful brushes with death happen quickly and often in a heated moment where he is thinking wholly about others and not himself. Once he has learned how carefully Dumbledore has engineered his fate, he has to face death without any illusions:

Terror washed over him as he lay on the floor, with that funeral drum pounding inside him. Would it hurt to die? All those times he had thought that it was about to happen and escaped, he had never really thought of the thing itself; His will to live had always been so much stronger than his fear of death. Yet it did not occur to him now to try to escape, to outrun Voldemort. It was over, he knew it, and all that was left was the thing itself: dying. (*Deathly Hallows* 692)

Despite feeling betrayed and manipulated by Dumbledore, Harry knows that Voldemort has to be stopped, and if the only way he can be stopped is if Voldemort kills that small

remaining part of himself, the unintended horcrux within Harry, then he is willing to die.

Nicole Jowsey argues that this is the singularly most heroic moment in all of the Harry Potter books, comparing Harry's actions to that of the Homeric hero, Achilles:

Achilles and Harry Potter share the same acceptance of their impending death. They share the moment of anxiety in the face of that distinctively impending ownmost possibility that is nonrelational and cannot be outstripped. They also see this impossible possibility of their own existence and walk toward their own demise, their own end. For these heroes, their death brings about their glory and demonstrates their sacrifice and their character as heroes. (Jowsey 79)

Harry offers up his life as a sacrifice for the greater good. It is a conscious choice that he makes. Just as he is motivated to pursue Voldemort by remembering the fallen, he once again thinks on those who have already fallen, all those who might still die. Harry comes to the realization that Dumbledore had counted on this fact, knowing, as he did, that “Harry would not let anyone else die for him now that he had discovered it was in his power to stop it” (693). Yet in a way, Harry seems to be discounting his own choice here: Dumbledore has not programmed or brainwashed him with ideals of heroism. Quite the contrary. What Rowling shows, repeatedly, is that Harry consciously and freely makes the correct moral choice. Walking into the Forbidden Forest to face his death might seem a predestined end, but Rowling is clear in this—nothing is foreordained. Harry wrestles with his burgeoning fear of death, but it is his own choice to go to face Voldemort to prevent others from dying. In Harry's estimation, it is the only moral recourse: “Like rain on a cold window, these thoughts patterned against the hard surface of the incontrovertible truth, which was that he must die. *I must die*. It must end” (*Deathly Hallows* 693). Rowling carefully frames this moment as a mental struggle. Harry is shown emotionally weakened, seeking comfort from the spirits of his parents, his

godfather, and his favorite professor. He is, for the first time, genuinely terrified of dying. Every step that he takes along the way is a conscious, calculated choice to move towards his own death, rather than to flee from it, as his adversary would do. The contrast is both deliberate and powerful. Harry, terrified of death, nonetheless chooses to die so that others might live. His action is glorified as heroic because it is a moral choice and one that requires tremendous love of others.

While having Harry offer himself up as a sacrifice to save others is probably the least subtle indicator that Rowling intended him to be a Christ-like character, she also makes a point of repeatedly demonstrating that Harry's love for others is coupled with a respect of life itself. Even those who wish Harry harm, or who have openly wronged him, often find themselves protected by his actions. Interestingly, though, there are a few instances where Harry acts antagonistically, even violently, at times, which further help to demonstrate that while he might be Christ-like in some ways, he is not a perfect imitation of Christ. And yet, in these instances, there is almost an immediate return to character for Harry. In *Prisoner of Azkaban*, for instance, when Harry first comes face to face with Sirius Black, whom he believes betrayed his parents, Harry gives in to his all-too-human rage: He had forgotten about magic—he had forgotten that he was short and skinny and thirteen, whereas Black was a tall, full-grown man—all Harry knew was that he wanted to hurt Black as badly as he could and that he didn't care how much he got hurt in turn (340). Harry's initial desire to cause harm is understandable, given that he erroneously believes that Black is personally responsible for his parents' deaths. Once Harry's initial burst of adrenaline fades, however, he holds Black at wandpoint and allows him to speak. Thanks to the timely arrival of Remus Lupin, Harry learns that Black is innocent, and the

guilt belongs to Peter Pettigrew. Black and Remus Lupin are ready to summarily execute Pettigrew for having a hand in James and Lily's death, but Harry stops them, instead insisting that they hand him over to the proper authorities. He tells both men, "I don't reckon my dad would have wanted his best friends to become killers" (376). Rather than continuing to seek vengeance, Harry argues for justice and mercy. Black and Lupin seem to want vengeance instead, and it falls to Harry, a thirteen-year-old boy, to remind them that "he can go to Azkaban" (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 375). Harry is no less invested in seeing Pettigrew punished. While he is perfectly willing to turn Pettigrew over to the authorities, where he will face imprisonment and the dementors, he refuses to be party to the taking of a life. To some extent, Harry's choice to stop Lupin and Black from killing Pettigrew might seem to simply be a matter of protecting both men from legal ramifications, but in light of what is revealed in *Half-Blood Prince*, that murder tears a wizard's soul, Harry's decision here is doubly meaningful. Not only has he saved Lupin and Black from any temporal peril they might have faced had they killed Pettigrew, he has also saved them from spiritual jeopardy as well.

Rowling repeats the pattern of Harry actively engaging in aggressive behavior only to have his respect for life immediately renewed through Harry's interactions with his cousin, Dudley. From the beginning of the series, Dudley is shown bullying and berating Harry, often with his father's encouragement. Normally, Harry is the victim, but at the beginning of *Order of the Phoenix*, he attempts to pick a fight with Dudley. In one of the few instances where Harry shows genuinely malicious intent, he openly insults his cousin, which gives "Harry enormous satisfaction to know how furious he was making Dudley; he felt as though he was siphoning off his own frustration into his cousin, the

only outlet he had” (13). When Dudley retaliates by telling Harry he has heard him moaning about Cedric’s death in his sleep, Harry pulls his wand: “Harry could feel fourteen years’ hatred of Dudley pounding in his veins—what wouldn’t he give to strike now” (15). Harry’s rage seems to be stoked by Dudley’s mockery of Cedric’s death, but it also hints at how much Harry has repressed the abuse he has faced at the Dursleys. Yet even so, when dementors arrive moments later, Harry’s rage is instantly forgotten. Instead, he warns Dudley to keep his mouth shut, believing that might offer some protection from the Dementor’s Kiss, before conjuring a Patronus to drive off the attacking dementors. No matter how much Dudley has tormented him, he is still a living, breathing person, and Harry knows that if the dementors administer the kiss, the result is a form of living death—existence as a soulless husk. Harry might dislike Dudley, but he cannot allow him to suffer the destruction of his soul, and so, once more, he acts to protect others from spiritual harm.

Using the Patronus Charm in front of Dudley causes all sorts of trouble for Harry initially—he faces expulsion from Hogwarts and effective banishment from the Wizarding World—but Rowling returns to this moment to reinforce both her philosophical belief in the importance of choices by showing the positive effect Harry’s actions have on Dudley and the idea that Harry is acting as a sort of spiritual savior. Although we are not told of any exchanges between the two of them in *Half-Blood Prince*, Dudley’s attitude towards Harry notably shifts in *Deathly Hallows*. When the Dursleys are set to leave their house, so that the Order of the Phoenix can spirit Harry away without risking harm to them, Dudley shows a marked change in how he treats Harry, and one that differs greatly from his parents. Hestia Jones, a member of the Order

of the Phoenix, objects to Dursleys' failure to say goodbye to Harry, but Harry tells her that "they think I'm a waste of space" (40). Dudley immediately contradicts this and points out "you saved my life" (40). Hestia, still outraged at the Dursleys' conduct, is incensed that Dudley doesn't say thank you, but Harry says his cousin saying he isn't a waste of space is "like I love you" (41). Notably, it is Harry interpreting Dudley's actions and meaning here, but Dudley offers no contradiction. When Harry jokingly suggests that the dementors may have given him back a new soul, Dudley even laughs. They even shake hands before they amicably part. Given that Dudley has been Harry's life-long tormentor, the reversal that happens after Harry saves him is an important one. Not only does it hint at Rowling's belief that no one is beyond redemption, but it also shows the importance of individual actions. In choosing to save Dudley, Harry has potentially saved his soul in many ways. Not only is Dudley spared the dementor's kiss, but he can also show love to someone who, very obviously, he regarded with disdain for much of his young life.

As much as Dudley torments Harry in the muggle world, his petty abuse is completely overshadowed by the behavior of Draco Malfoy. In *Sorcerer's Stone*, they meet for the first time while shopping Diagon Alley, and Harry takes an immediate dislike to Draco, realizing that "he was strongly reminded of Dudley" (77). Unlike his cousin, whose actions are largely just to torment Harry and occasionally bully younger kids, Draco displays characteristics of antisocial behavior. He is the first character in the series to hurl the racist epithet "Mudblood" at someone (*Chamber of Secrets* 112). Likewise, when the Heir of Slytherin is believed to be on the loose, Malfoy only talks about how he wishes a muggle-born witch or wizard would die, adding "Pity it wasn't

Granger” (267). Numerous times throughout the series, Malfoy is shown as petty and vindictive, reveling in cruelty, and wishing harm on others. Throughout *Prisoner of Azkaban*, he feigns the severity of his injuries in an attempt to have a hippogriff put to death in revenge, even though the wounds were received due to his own inattention and disregard for the creature’s nature. At the close of *Order of the Phoenix*, Draco and his friends attempt to waylay Harry on the Hogwarts Express. Fortunately for Harry, they are stopped, but on their return trip to Hogwarts in *Half-Blood Prince*, Draco stuns Harry and stomps on his face. “That’s from my father,” Draco tells Harry before covering his prone body with the Invisibility Cloak (154). Draco then leaves him on the train and departs, neither knowing nor caring what Harry’s fate will be.

Throughout the series, Harry and Draco have frequent clashes, and while it seems that Draco has little regard for Harry’s life, Harry only resorts to violence with Draco on two occasions. In *Order of the Phoenix*, Harry and George Weasley are goaded into physically assaulting Malfoy at the end of a Quidditch match. In that instance, Rowling depicts it as little more than Harry losing control and finally hitting Draco. Their fight in *Half-Blood Prince* is radically different. Throughout the novel, Harry is obsessed with the belief that Draco has become a Death Eater. At one point in the novel, Harry confronts Draco, who then resorts to magic. Harry returns the attack, using a *Sectum Sempra* spell, a spell which he has no idea the effect of. Harry then watches, aghast, as “Blood spurted from Malfoy’s face and chest as though he had been slashed with an invisible sword. He staggered backward and collapsed onto the waterlogged floor with a great splash, his wand falling from his limp right hand” (522). Mortified by what he has done, Harry calls out for help, even as he kneels down beside Malfoy, powerless to help him. Only the

timely arrival of Severus Snape saves Malfoy's life. Harry is notably sickened by what he has done, and even worse, Snape's goading that he surprised Harry "knew such Dark Magic" (524). After this encounter, Harry never again uses a spell that could kill. Even in his interactions with Death Eaters in *Deathly Hallows*, Harry refuses to use lethal force, much to the annoyance of his adult mentors. When Stan Shunpike appears among the Death Eaters pursuing Harry and Hagrid in their flight from Privet Drive, Harry attempts to disarm Stan with an Expelliarmus Charm. Lupin, not understanding how much Harry values life, tells him that "the time for Disarming is past! These people are trying to capture and kill you! At least Stun if you aren't prepared to kill!" (70). Harry, however, has a clear and compelling reason for his choice, telling Lupin that "we were hundreds of feet up! Stan's not himself, and if I Stunned him and he'd fallen, he'd have died the same as if I'd used Avada Kedavra" (70). Harry is not only unwilling to directly kill, but he's aware enough in a situation where his own life is in jeopardy that he can focus so intently on the well being of others. Although he claims part of his unwillingness to kill Stan is because he doesn't think Stan is acting of his own free will, that is just supposition on Harry's part. He has no way of knowing if Stan is a follower of Voldemort's cause or not. But as his altercation with Draco shows, even when he genuinely believes that his opponent is a devoted Death Eater, he is horrified by the thought he might have taken a life.

By the end of the series, Draco Malfoy is a changed man. Stening and Stening argue that Draco "changes more than any other character in the series" (292). Like Dudley, Malfoy has his brushes with death, but unlike Dudley, who is mostly ignorant of what is happening to him at the time, Draco is fully aware of the dangers he faces. After

nearly dying in his fight with Harry, Draco still continues his attempts to kill Dumbledore, in part because the Dark Lord has threatened his life if he fails. When Snape then arrives to provide a mercy killing to Dumbledore, he is also protecting Draco's soul, but the young wizard is not spared entirely. In "The Magic of Personal Transformation," Garver argues that the Malfoys "underestimate the depth of evil to which Voldemort would sink" (176). At the beginning of *Deathly Hallows*, he is forced to sit at the table with Lord Voldemort and his followers, watching as a Hogwarts teacher, Professor Burbage, begs for her life, only to be killed and then fed to the snake, Nagini. Forced to witness such horrors seems to have a profound effect on Draco. His youthful disregard for life seems displaced by a newfound disgust for the unvarnished evil before him. As such, Draco refuses to confirm the identity of either Harry or Hermione when they are brought to Malfoy Manor. Even though he is disarmed by Harry when the heroes escape, Malfoy still, tentatively, retains his allegiance to Lord Voldemort all the way to the Battle of Hogwarts, when he, Crabbe and Goyle confront Harry in the Room of Requirement. Draco's waning affinity for the Death Eaters is even more apparent in that Crabbe seems to be leading the trio, and it is Crabbe who unleashes Fiendfyre, or "cursed fire" that consumes everything in the room (635). Although he has a moment of hesitation, Harry turns back to save Draco and Goyle when they are almost consumed by the fire.

According to Andrea Stojilkov, Harry has an "inability to leave others to die, despite their mutual animosity" (138). In choosing to save Draco's life, Harry fundamentally alters the nature of their relationship, just as he does by saving Dudley's life, and as with Dudley, he seems to be saving Draco's soul as well. By plucking him out of the fires, he saves his body, but thereafter, Draco is allowed a sort of sanctuary in the castle. Disarmed and

showing no interest in fighting any longer, Harry leaves him, without restraint or condition. The only words that Draco utters are to ask after Crabbe, further suggesting his changed nature, in that his first thoughts are for others, not himself. After the battle of Hogwarts, when Draco is reunited with his parents, they are even allowed to sit unmolested amongst the victors, unsure of their place in the world.

Rowling ends *Deathly Hallows* with an epilogue, set nineteen years after the aforementioned battle when Harry, among others, is seeing his children off to Hogwarts at the beginning of term, and it is here that Harry has his final encounter with Draco. Harry looks up to see him in the swirling steam, standing with his son, and “Draco caught sight of Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny staring at him, nodded curtly, and turned away again” (756). While Draco’s nod is far less drastic of a change than the handshake offered by Dudley, it is nonetheless a sign of respect given to a former adversary and a suggestion that while they might not be friends, they can at least be civil and cordial with each other. Such civility would not have been possible had Harry not shown a willingness to put himself in harm’s way to save another. More importantly, he puts himself in danger, not for a friend, but for a rival, someone he would almost consider an enemy. What more extreme expression of love could Rowling imagine?

Arguably, Rowling’s emphasis on the ability of people to be redeemed ties into one of Harry’s choices that marks him as being unlike his predecessors—his unwillingness to take a life. While he does kill the basilisk in *Chamber of Secrets*, in part because the only other choice would be to forfeit Ginny Weasley’s soul to Tom Riddle, he never takes a human life, even in self-defense. On three separate occasions, Harry uses spells classified by the Wizarding World as Unforgivable Curses. He employs the

Cruciatus Curse against Bellatrix LeStrange and again against Amycus Carrow, and he uses the Imperius Curse in order to gain entry to Bellatrix LeStrange's vault in *Deathly Hallows*. In some of these cases, Harry is morally justified. Gaining entry to the Gringott's vault is imperative to stopping Voldemort, but his use of the Cruciatus curse against Amycus Carrow is born more out of indignant rage than anything else. What it also reveals is that Harry is not above inflicting pain on others, particularly if he feels justified, but he will not kill, reflecting a much older conception of a Christian champion. In *Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors*, John Edward Damon points out that "Christians had long perceived a tension, even an antithesis or antagonism, between the shedding of blood and a life of sanctity" (4). Harry's use of the Disarming Charm not only helps to further establish him as being Christ-like, but it also highlights his own view of just how precious life is. Thus, his predilection for disarming his opponents instead of directly injuring them serves a thematic purpose. Using the Disarming Charm does more than simply deprive an opponent of their ability to harm him: it deprives them of their ability to hurt themselves. Without the ability to use the Killing Curse to commit murder, Harry is protecting his enemies from their own worse impulses. Thus, Lucius Malfoy's mocking epithet, "Patronus Potter," is ironically apt (*Order of the Phoenix* 154). Just as the Patronus Charm guards the soul of the witch or wizard who conjures it from harm by the dementors, so too does Harry protect the souls of others by keeping them from using their wands as weapons to kill. Harry is also making a moral choice here. While he might not endanger his own soul by killing in self-defense, the choice to take a life is irrevocable. A disarmed opponent can live another day. More importantly, they can know remorse and change. Not only is Harry taking away their ability to hurt themselves, but he also gives

them the opportunity to change, much in the same way that his cousin and Malfoy change.

Not even the prospect of revenge for his parents can provoke Harry to use lethal force, and here also, Rowling depicts Harry as Christlike. Despite Dumbledore's attempts to stoke Harry's desire for vengeance, which does not seem to be part of his character. The only time he shows any proclivity for wanting revenge is when he erroneously believes Sirius Black serves Voldemort, and perhaps this error on his part informs his outlook as he matures. Still, Dumbledore seems to think an impulse towards payback, not justice, somehow drives Harry to act. In *Half-Blood Prince*, for instance, Dumbledore asks "if Voldemort had never murdered your father, would he have imparted in you a furious desire for revenge" (510)? Even though Harry says, "I'd want him finished [. . .] and I'd want to do it," Harry's final actions with Voldemort prove otherwise (512). Although he spends most of *Deathly Hallows* tracking down the horcruxes to destroy them, fully intent on bringing about Voldemort's demise, it is not a desire for revenge that motivates Harry. It is a desire to protect others. Here too, Harry's actions echo Biblical teachings, in this case, Romans 12:19, which reads "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written: "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord." (*New American Standard*). While Harry does not seem to anticipate divine retribution to fall on Voldemort, he nonetheless eschews revenge. Dumbledore's attempts to motivate Harry by appealing for his need for vengeance reveal more about the older wizard character than Harry's and highlight one of the reasons why Dumbledore was never able to become the master of death, despite having sought the Hallows. Dumbledore is willing to kill, or at least, he has shown the willingness in the

past. He reveals as much when he and Harry speak in the limbo-like Kings Cross, telling Harry that “I never knew which of us, in that last, horrific fight, had actually cast the curse that killed my sister” (*Deathly Hallows* 718). Had Dumbledore displayed Harry’s proclivities to disarm, rather than harm, he would have no doubts about Arianna’s demise. The fact that he does says that he, like Grindlewald, was attempting to slay his opponent. Worse still, Dumbledore fails to clarify exactly who he was intending to kill, as the way he explains the ensuing fight between himself, Grindlewald and Aberforth raises the possibility that he was attempting to slay his own brother, and not out of self-defense. Curiously, Karin Westman reads this as a negative example of love. In her essay, “The Weapon We Have Is Love,” Westman argues that by the end of the Harry Potter series, “love’s power emerges as a complex amalgam of desires fueled by love in its many forms, a heady concoction that is potentially dangerous to the lover and the beloved” (194). The chief example of dangerous love that she cites is Dumbledore’s love for Grindlewald, arguing that Dumbledore’s moral lapse is due to his love of Grindlewald. Rowling herself has acknowledged that Dumbledore “lost his moral center when he became infatuated” (“PotterCast 131”). What’s important to note here, though, is that Rowling uses this as an example to differentiate between spiritual love, which lifts Harry to the heights of heroism, as opposed to physical desire, but whereas Westman reads this as the dangers of love, Rowling’s explanation places the blame squarely on Dumbledore. It is a moral failing on his part. He allows himself to become so infatuated that he makes bad choices.

In their exchange at Kings Cross, Dumbledore offers up another reason why he was unable to become the master of death, in that his desire to do so was rooted entirely

in selfishness and a desire for power over others. Dumbledore explains to Harry that he and Grindlewald imagined that they would become “invincible masters of death” if they were to unify the Hallows (717). Although Dumbledore allows himself the fiction that what they would do would be for the greater good of all, the real goal would be to put themselves into positions of absolute power over the wizarding world. Only after Arianna’s death does Dumbledore understand how empty his rhetoric had been. He seems to have a genuine change of heart—thus the many refusals of the post of Minister of Magic—but he still nonetheless knows that he is unworthy of uniting the Deathly Hallows for one specific reason—his intentionality is not pure and unselfish. The one Hallow that he is allowed to master is the Elder Wand, as he does so “not for gain, but to save others from it” (720). At one time or another, Dumbledore has all three Hallows, but the Cloak is never rightfully his to possess, and the Resurrection Stone, corrupted for a time as a Horcrux, only leads to his death, as he takes it in haste, eager to use it for selfish purposes. Yet again, Dumbledore makes a bad choice, and that choice precludes the possibility that he can become the master of death.

On the other hand, Rowling has Dumbledore himself proclaim that Harry is the true master of death, and in doing so, establishes that Harry is both an exception and someone to be emulated. Dumbledore tells Harry, “You are the true master of death, because the true master does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying” (720-21). Here, in the penultimate chapter of the series, Rowling links back to the ideas that she establishes in the very first book, where Voldemort’s parasitic existence is shown as horrific and abominable, and Harry is willing to die rather than let him come back to

power. The main difference is that Harry has come to a mature understanding of death by the end of the seventh book, and he still, despite his fears and trepidations, walks towards it. Fraser Los argues that “it is only after Harry overcomes his fear, after accepting his own mortality in terms of his loving connection with all life around him, that his mature life begins” (33). Los’s argument seems almost paradoxical, given that Harry honestly believes that he is about to die, but numerous critics have contended that this is one of the most fundamental elements to understanding Rowling’s overarching message about death. Shawn Klein, for instance, points out in “Harry Potter and Humanity: Choices, Love, and Death” that it is “Harry’s accepting of his mortality that allows him to embrace his humanity” (41). Similarly, Nicole Jowsey, drawing upon the works of Martin Heidegger, argues that “Harry’s choice to make this heroic sacrifice makes him an authentic Being-in-the-world” (78). What Jowsey means by this is that in accepting death as inevitable and choosing it for the benefit of others, Harry can overcome his own fear of death and genuinely live. Such a reading hinges on the idea that the death Harry experiences in the Forbidden Forest is a symbolic death, and given that Dumbledore suggest that Harry is still alive, perhaps more alive than ever now that he is wholly himself without a part of Voldemort within him, perhaps that is how Rowling truly intends it to be.

Unfortunately, the exchange between Dumbledore and Harry in Kings Cross is often ambiguous as to what is actually happening and sometimes is even contradictory. Andrea Stojilkov argues that “Harry’s King’s Cross is some kind of afterlife,” even noting that there are heavenlike qualities about it (141). Dumbledore, however, gives somewhat mixed messages. When Harry asks if he is dead, for example, Dumbledore

replies “on the whole, dear boy, I think not” (707). At the end of their exchange, however, Harry asks if he must go back, in which he seems to be asking if he has to live.

Dumbledore replies that he would be able to move on, never explaining where “on” might be (722). If Harry is not dead, why would he ask about going back? What this suggests then, is that for a brief time, Harry occupies a liminal space between life and death where he is not really either. Moreover, it suggests that should he choose to do so, he could go on to join all those who have gone before him, his friends, his mentors, and most importantly, his parents. Harry hesitates momentarily, but Dumbledore gives him one last choice: “If you return, there is a chance he can be finished for good [. . .] By returning, you may ensure that fewer souls are maimed, fewer families torn apart. If that seems to you a worthy goal, then we say good-bye for the present” (722). Harry of course cannot allow others to suffer when he has the ability to prevent it, so he chooses to return. For Rowling to maintain her central message about accepting death, Harry cannot be fully dead, despite the apparent offer that he can go on if he wishes. When Harry asks Dumbledore if it is all “in his head,” Rowling seems to be nodding to the idea that Harry’s time has not yet come, and he himself recognizes as much (723). Rowling would have to violate her own rules to allow Harry to return from true death. He cannot die and rise again, like the slain Aslan of Lewis’s work, again, because he is not a literal representation of Christ. He does, however, suffer a near death, a symbolic death, born out of love for others and a desire to protect them.

Harry’s return also allows Rowling to make a major deviation from her standard rhetorical form in *Deathly Hallows*. Normally, the books end with Dumbledore imparting wisdom to Harry after the climax (which often involves tangling with

Voldemort in one of his various forms), Harry has to confront Voldemort once more after their meeting at Kings Cross. While many critics have acknowledged that Harry's acceptance of death ties him to his humanity, it is perhaps even more important how Harry himself, now ennobled with the title master of death, engages with the Dark Lord in their final meeting. Voldemort, erroneously believing that he is the master of the Elder Wand, taunts Harry with the fact that he killed Snape, thereby ruining Dumbledore's plans, but Harry's response is not to argue. Instead, he does the unthinkable. He attempts to save Tom Riddle's soul. "I'd advise you to think about what you've done . . . Think and try for some remorse, Riddle," Harry says (741). For once, Voldemort is genuinely caught off guard, and Harry continues, "It's your one last chance [. . .] it's all you've got left . . . I've seen what you'll be otherwise . . . Be a man. . . try. . . Try for some remorse" (741). Remorse is the only cure for the damage done by creating a horcrux. Hermione has previously attested that "the pain of it can destroy you," and adds "I can't see Voldemort attempting it," yet Harry nonetheless makes an attempt to save his nemesis's soul. Doing so would require Voldemort to "be a man," which might as well be Harry telling him to "be human," to reject his obsessive quest for immortality, which is destroying him, and to embrace the fate that awaits us all. Harry offers his opponent, the man who slaughtered his parents without remorse, a choice that could save his soul.

Harry Potter is the master of death not just because he is willing to die but because he serves as a model for how to live a virtuous life that emphasizes selfless love of others over selfish pride and self-interest. Harry serves as a reminder that if we live well, we can die well, without fears or regrets. He becomes Rowling's ultimate example of how to achieve a good death by embracing love. Dumbledore's words "do not pity the

dead. Pity the living, and above all, pity those who live without love” (*Deathly Hallows* 722) serve as a reminder to us all. If we choose love, if we let go of fear and hate, there is nothing to fear in death. It is, after all, the one thing that unites us all in our humanity.

CONCLUSION: TOLKIEN'S (AND ROWLING'S) LINGERING LEGACY

In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, James and Mendlesohn make the claim that “two people’s understanding of the fantastic can be sufficiently different as to generate a list of texts with little overlap apart from Tolkien” (3). As an author of fantasy literature, Tolkien has been undeniably successful, particularly when one considers that *The Lord of the Rings* is the second most successful English novel of all times.⁵¹ Not surprisingly then, many aspiring writers have sought to emulate him. In many instances, their works have displayed little more than vestigial traces of the rich mythologies and folklore that he employed in crafting his works. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the shelves of many bookstores were filled with novels published by TSR Inc, all of which were set in worlds originally created for *Dungeons & Dragons*, a tabletop role playing game that borrowed heavily from Tolkien.⁵² Likewise, the proliferation of orcs and halflings into numerous other tabletop and computer games can trace its lineage through Gygax and Arneson’s creation back to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Subsequent editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* have often heavily diluted Tolkien’s influence, but the enduring popularity of the game is owed, in no small part, to Tolkien’s enduring legacy.

⁵¹ Only *A Tale of Two Cities* has sold more copies, as of 2011.

⁵² Gary Gygax was notorious for “borrowing” from other authors. Remarkably, it wasn’t Tolkien’s estate, but Saul Zaentz, who at the time held the rights to some of Tolkien’s work, who sued. TSR Inc. was forced to settle, and various appropriated elements, such as hobbits, ents, and the balrog had to be renamed. Orc was not a protected term because Gygax’s attorney was able to prove the term predated Tolkien, appearing in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* (even though it applies to a titanic sea beast and not a humanoid creature). The term orc was allowed to be used in the tabletop game, and in the last fifty years has become ubiquitous in fantasy media, particularly tabletop games (though much less so in literature). See David Ewalt’s *Of Dice and Men* for the full details.

While there are, inarguably, works that bear only a superficial resemblance to *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien's meditation on death and the desire for deathlessness has, in many ways, codified tropes that have been widely employed by subsequent fantasy authors. Despite attempts to tie Tolkien's perception of death to various pagan traditions,⁵³ his views of death and deathlessness are squarely situated in his own Catholic beliefs. Tolkien openly mines pagan cultures for folklore to appropriate into his stories and borrows customs and rituals for the people of Middle-earth, because the world that he envisions is a pre-historical, mythical version of earth. Open and overt references to Christianity are not there because they would be anachronistic. Therefore, the way Tolkien approaches death and the desire for immortality is "Christian, but without the trappings of Christianity" (Nelson 210). Tolkien is not attempting to proselytize, and while the text does serve a didactic purpose, in that it does offer a commentary on death and dying, the concept is hinted at subtly, rather than overtly presented to the reader.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien presents examples of good deaths which may, at first glance, seem to reinforce pagan ideals of heroism but which are more clearly rooted in love and service to others. Thus, Tolkien can be seen in a larger context of works that interrogate our notions of heroism, focusing more on intentionality than on action. In *The Lord of the Rings*, those who are the most heroic are those who are willing to lay down their lives, if need be, so that others might live and have a better tomorrow. However paradoxical it might seem, it is a willingness to die born of hope and optimism rather than

⁵³ In their book, *J. R. R. Tolkien*, Deborah and Ivor Rogers argue that Tolkien advances a distinctly Norse, pagan understanding of death. Stewart Pigott's book, *The Druids*, and T. W. Rolleston's *Myths and Legends of Celtic Europe* both hint at Tolkien resurrecting Druidical customs.

despair and hopelessness. Conversely, Tolkien's view of a bad death is one where despair does take hold, or else it is a death brought on because of the individual's own self-centered, destructive desires. In Tolkien's exploration of deathlessness, we can also see the germination of an idea that will persist throughout fantasy, that the unnatural extension of mortal life, whether deliberate or accidental, is a violation of the natural order. To seek immortality is to seek to become other than human. Tolkien symbolizes this by having those character who gain unnatural immortality become distinctly Other—they become monstrous caricatures of living beings, cut-off from humanity by their desire and impulse, their moral failings all too visible in their outward appearance. Likewise, those same traits that lead to dishonorable deaths are the very same that have characters clinging tenaciously to the continuation of life, even after they have ceased to take any joy from living.

Even though J. K. Rowling has often played down the influence that Tolkien has had on her writing, in many ways, the Harry Potter series magnifies the themes of death and deathlessness and offers, for a young adult reader, a guide on how to die well. Rowling is far more didactic in her presentation, mostly because she is writing for a younger audience. Harry, "The Boy Who Lived," spends seven books growing and maturing, with the inevitable showdown with Lord Voldemort always looming before him. Rowling, like Tolkien, situates her philosophy of death and dying in an explicitly Judeo-Christian context.⁵⁴ Each loss that Harry endures, beginning with his parents, takes

⁵⁴ Unlike Tolkien, who has only been examined in the context of possibly presenting a pagan ideal of death, Rowling has been accused of actively attempting to lure kids to satanism through her depictions of magic. Weirdly enough, those who sometimes advocate for Tolkien and Lewis's works are the same who would

on an almost hagiographical context, for those that he loses along the way become exemplars for how he is both to live and to face his mortality. For the reader, they serve as examples of “good deaths,” that are to be admired and emulated. Unlike Tolkien, however, Rowling has fewer unworthy deaths to offer as counterpoints, focusing mostly on a singular example of a man who so fears death that even his pseudonym hints at his fears—Lord Voldemort. Tom Marvolo Riddle’s relentless desire to overcome death leads him to commit numerous atrocities, and as he severs parts of his soul, his outward form becomes increasingly monstrous to behold. Far from understanding this as the cost of his pursuit of immortality, Voldemort sees his outward change as a mark of his growing power. In openly espousing a moral philosophy diametrically opposed to Judeo-Christian teachings, he embraces instead an ideology that is self-aggrandizing and rejects traditional notions of morality. Harry, on the other hand, formulates an understanding of Judeo-Christian ethics without any awareness of the explicit teachings of the Church. By the end of the seventh novel, *Deathly Hallows*, Harry becomes the “master of death,” not by avoiding his own mortality, but by embracing it and accepting that his death must serve as an act of sacrifice for the benefit of the world.

In *Death In Literature*, Outi Hakola and Sari Kivistö note that “the awareness of the finitude of life may thus lead us to ponder the human condition or to structure our lives in a meaningful way” (viii). *The Lord of the Rings* and the Harry Potter series wed these concepts together. In using fantastic elements to examine the human condition, they present characters who can defy the natural order, unnaturally extending their lives at a

bash Harry Potter. See Senland and Vozzola, “Christian Perspectives on Harry Potter: Tool of Satan or Christian Parable?”

devastating cost to both themselves and society as a whole. At the same time, these works stress the importance of living a virtuous life while accepting the inevitability of our own end. In terms of plot, little connects these two works. About the closest Rowling comes to borrowing from Tolkien would be that the destruction of the horcruxes is necessary to bring about Voldemort's fall, which bears a passing resemblance to the destruction of the One Ring. In terms of thematic connections, these works share a very deep connection. Whether Rowling was inspired by Tolkien more than she admits, or whether this is another instance of her "fishing from the same stream of ideas," to use Terry Pratchett's analogy, cannot fully be answered (Pratchett and Simmons 3).⁵⁵ What is notable, however, is that both Tolkien and Rowling, in exploring the selfishness at the root of a desire for deathlessness, also employ elements of horror in their attempt to dispel these desires from the reader. They make the process of becoming immortal utterly abjectionable. Not only do the characters who seek (or in Tolkien case, sometimes inadvertently gain) serial immortality become physically repulsive, they are shown to be morally repugnant as well. Furthermore, Tolkien and Rowling also seem to be explicitly rejecting philosophical trends that dominated much of the twentieth century. Quirrell, Voldemort's ill-fated lackey, paraphrases *Beyond Good and Evil* when he says that he was

⁵⁵ Rowling has been accused of plagiarizing Patchett, Neil Gaiman, Ursula K. Le Guin, and several other authors, all because of similarities in terms of basic plot elements. Patchett seemed amused by the accusations, given just how many authors have used the School of Magic trope before them. Gaiman's work on *Books of Magic*, a comic book appearing under the Vertigo imprint of DC comics, has remained the work most frequently compared to the Harry Potter series. Gaiman, who maintains a fairly consistent web presence, addressed this on his tumblr, stating, "As I've said over the years, I think Ms. Rowling is smart enough that if she had been ripping off Tim Hunter and the *Books of Magic*, she would have changed a lot more things. He would have looked different, owls would have become eagles etc." Likewise, on X (formerly Twitter) he states, "Tim Hunter and Harry Potter are different characters and, beyond similar-looking boys who will be the Greatest Magic User, the stories and worlds are nothing alike." Arguably, Harry Potter isn't even close to being the Greatest Magic User in his story.

“full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil,” and “there is only power, and those too weak to seek it (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 291). Tolkien’s disdain for Nietzsche might not figure as overtly into *The Lord of the Rings*, but his letters reveal that he viewed the Nietzschean idea of the *Übermensch* to be “a silly and evil philosophy” that ultimately led people to embrace cruelty and disdain for their fellow man (“From a Letter to Caroline Everett” 258). Thus, what has often been perceived as nostalgia underlying their works might more accurately be termed as a repudiation of modern attempts to redefine morality and eschew humility in favor of undisguised egoism. As Linda Greenwood puts it, “for Tolkien, fantasy is a flight to, rather than from, reality” (185). The same is true of Rowling. Rather than encouraging their readers to simply escape into a never-never land where death is unknown, both authors force their readers to confront the eventuality of their own end and question how they live their lives.

While J. K. Rowling’s work might offer the most obvious basis for comparison, Tolkien’s influence on the perceptions of death and dying can be found throughout the fantasy genre to a varying extent. Lloyd Alexander, who is frequently pointed to as one of Tolkien’s more successful imitators due to his story resolving in a way “similar to Tolkien’s epic,” also leans into the conception of unnatural immortality as something to be abhorred (Nikolajeva, “The Development of Children’s Fantasy” 57). In *Taran Wanderer*, the fourth of the *Chronicles of Prydain*, Taran encounters Morda, a wizard who has concealed his life in his finger, which he has severed and hidden in the forest. Morda is described as having “a gaunt face the color of dry clay, eyes glittering like cold crystals deep set in a jutting brow as though at the bottom of a well. The skull was hairless, the mouth a livid scar stitched with wrinkles” (89). He is also an amoral monster who openly

admits to not caring about the lives of others. Though this is but a brief interlude in the overall story, it can be seen as both echoing Tolkien and prefiguring Rowling in how it handles the dangerous lure of immortality.

Similarly, Peter S. Beagle explores immortality in *The Last Unicorn*. There, King Haggard achieves a sort of deathless existence by capturing and holding hostage the unicorns of the world, but the more he grasps at life, the less joy he finds in it. To protect the last unicorn from being captured, the magician Schmedrik inadvertently turns her human, and through her interactions with the world and her newly acquired mortality, Beagle is able to explore the pain, joy, and suffering that make us human, positioning the story in such a way that the Lady Amalthea (the unicorn in human form) comes to view regaining her immortality as a curse, rather than a blessing, and only does so out of love, to restore life to a mortal man.

Even though their works began as derivative products intended to boost sales for *Dungeons & Dragons*, Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman's *Dragonlance Chronicles* and *Dragonlance Legends* explored what it means to have a good death and how damaging the quest for deathlessness could be. Sturm Brightblade, the last scion of a once noble line, dies heroically to keep his friends from harm in the second book of the *Dragonlance Chronicles*, *Dragons of Winter Night*. His selfless sacrifice contrasts sharply with the wizard Raistlin Majere, who exchanges part of his soul for power, but at the expense of his physical health. He also becomes permanently marked with golden skin and hourglass shaped pupils, which grant him the ability to see times ravages on all things. Driven to near madness with the knowledge of his own mortality, he becomes obsessed with

gaining immortality and challenges the gods themselves in *Test of the Twins*, the final book of the *Dragonlance Legends*. Raistlin comes close to achieving his goal, but on the brink of victory, he waives, seeing what will become of creation and what will happen to the one person he ever truly loved, his brother Caramon. He yields, sacrificing himself to prevent the end of the world.

Dangerous immortality likewise features into Dianna Wynne Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle*. In the story, the young witch Sophie is cursed with old age and takes refuge in the titular castle, where the supposedly evil wizard Howl resides. Rumor has it that Howl is a sort of bluebeard, but it turns out to only be partly true: he only *emotionally* devastates the women he encounters. In the castle, she also encounters a fire demon, Calcifer, who offers to help her break her curse if she can help him break the contract he has with Howl. Eventually, Sophie learns that Calcifer is really a fallen star who was afraid to die. Howl takes pity on Calcifer and gives the demon his heart, so that he might live. The exchange grants them both extended lives, but at the cost of Howl's mortality. Though he has only just begun to slip—his former mentor worries that he has changed from a force of good in the world to a selfish cad—the story offers an example of what he might become in the Witch of the Waste, a character who has entered into a similar arrangement with her fire demon. In her utter derangement, she seeks Howl's head to complete her nightmarishly patched together “perfect man,” hinting at what Howl will become if Sophie were unable to break the contract.

Other authors lean *heavily* into abjecting the desire for immortality. N. K. Jemisin's adult fantasy *Killing Moon*, which loosely pulls from Egyptian and Nubian myths, centers around Ehiru, a Gatherer, whose job it is to enter the Dreaming and help the dying pass painlessly into the afterlife. From the dying, he collects Dream-blood, which is shared with the priestesses of the temple so that they can heal the sick and afflicted. Unfortunately, Dream-blood has an almost addictive quality to it, and Ehiru begins to question his faith when he learns about Reapers, Gatherers who have forsaken their holy purpose and instead feed off the dying, becoming monstrous, immortal caricatures of living men. Eventually, it is revealed that the mere presence of a Reaper is enough to cause entire cities to fall to sickness and ruin. Worse, the prince of the realm, Ehiru's brother, intends to use the power of the Reapers to commit genocide, believing that such a massive influx of Dream-blood will make him immortal.

Similarly, Jonathan Stroud's *Lockwood & Co.* series features an alternative earth completely overrun with ghosts which are quite willing and capable of inflicting harm upon the living. In Stroud's novels, only children can properly see ghosts, losing the ability as they age, which means that it falls upon the youth to protect their elders from supernatural harm, usually a great personal risk. Lucy Carlyle, the chief protagonist of the books, only joins the Lockwood agency because she witnesses a number of other agents her age be slaughtered due to their adult handler's negligence, and she flees to London in hopes of safer working conditions. In the end, "The Problem" the euphemistic term used to describe the mass arrival of ghosts into the world some hundred years earlier, is discovered to be the result of one group, the Orpheus Society, punching through the veil between life and death in an attempt to gain immortality for themselves. While it works

for the few who benefit, the cost is horror for everyone else and the wholesale slaughter of innocents.

The Australian author Garth Nix explores similar themes in his Old Kingdom series, beginning with *Sabriel*, where we are introduced to the Abhorsen, whose job it is to ensure that the dead do not trouble the living. In Nix's world, we learn that even death is not the end of suffering, for Necromancers can summon the dead to be their slaves, but there are also the Greater Dead, individuals who refuse to go peacefully into death out of their own fear, and as a result, become undead creatures that need to feed on the living to retain their rotting semblance of life. Nix presents this form of immortality as essentially pure appetite, for the longer the dead fight to remain in the world of the living, the more they lose their identity, until only the need to go on remains.

These themes have even spread beyond the pages of fantasy literature into other media as well. Shortly before it was acquired by Wizards of the Coast in 1997, TSR licensed Black Isle Software to produce a video game based on their *Planescape* setting. Simply titled *Planescape: Torment*, it was not released until 1999. By that point, a new edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* was already poised for launch, and many of the core game mechanics used by *Planescape: Torment* were already outdated and considered clunky holdovers from a previous iteration of the tabletop game. Prior to its release, many predicted it would flop, but as soon as it hit the shelves, it started receiving glowing reviews for the depth of the story that it presented. In the game, the player takes on the persona of the Nameless One, an amnesiac who cannot die. No matter how much his body is damaged, he simply reawakens and begins again. At the point where the game

begins, this has apparently been happening for hundreds, if not thousands of years. The only difference is that in the past when it happened, the Nameless One forgot everything that had transpired in his previous life, but now he's starting to remember again. The game then becomes a quest to figure out why he is immortal. As it turns out, the Nameless One himself bargained with a night hag to find a way to make himself immortal, due to his fear of death. In learning the truth about his immortality, the Nameless One also discovers he has been the cause of immense suffering (the game hints that it is possibly millions of people who have suffered). While there are numerous ways that the game can end, numerous endings call for the player to willingly sacrifice the character so that the Nameless Ones companions can live again.

What is also interesting, besides how often these themes present themselves in fantasy literature and media, is that the authors who employ represent a wide variety of faiths. Like Tolkien and Rowling, Lloyd Alexander was a practicing Christian. Peter S. Beagle is Jewish, Tracy Hickman is a practicing member of the LDS church, and N. K. Jemisin defines herself as "spiritual but not religious" ("Atheism in a World"). Both Dianna Wynne Jones and Garth Nix are avowed agnostics, and Margaret Weiss has simply stated that she claims no formal religion. As for Stroud, to my knowledge, he has never publicly attested to any particular faith or lack thereof. Despite these varied religious backgrounds, there seems to be an understanding running throughout these texts that immortality is not something to which humans should aspire. In *Ontological Humility: Lord Voldemort and the Philosophers*, Nancy Holland has this to say about the value of Rowling's work:

Rowling's books, again like Lewis's, Tolkien's, and White's, reveal one piece, perhaps one important piece, of the unthought of the modern world in a way that makes it available to those who have never studied great works of art or walked into a philosophy classroom. This may be the role of the best genre art—to bring to everyone the insights philosophy and literary fiction may bring to only a few. And Rowling's saga has the advantage for the new century of putting the emphasis on a form of ontological arrogance, racism, that is both broader and more deeply rooted in our culture than the nationalism more appropriate to the conflicts of the mid-twentieth century. Rowling's world is not Britain in the past or the future, but the global world of our technological present, and, while racism may not be the only or perhaps the most dangerous form of arrogance in that world, it is at least one that opens the window to the underlying error of believing that humans can know everything, do anything, and control their own destiny. (133)

That we all die, that we *must* die, is the commonality that we all share. To deny that is to deny our humanity and to place ourselves above others, rather than accepting that we are all bound by common social bonds. At a time when we are seemingly more polarized than ever, seeking all the ways that we are different, perhaps this is the most important lesson that fantasy can teach us.

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