

Margaret-Ann Simonetta

Professor Elisabeth McKetta

Harvard University

9 May 2017

"You are the true master of death, because the true Master does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts that he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying." - Albus Dumbledore

### Harry Potter and the Master of Death

For decades, the *Harry Potter* series has provided its global readers with essential life-lessons some may use throughout their lifetime, showing the series is more than just a handful of books, it's a way of life. Across J. K. Rowling's seven-book series, which chronicles a young boy's new and unique life in the wizarding world, Harry Potter readers are struck with a plethora of moral implications that can be extracted from the texts and used in everyday life scenarios. However, there's one underlying overtone that riddles the series as a whole: the illusion of death. The series begins and ends with the concept of mortality, and the books teach their readers that death, no matter how hard one tries to avoid it, is inevitable for us all. Yet the characters within the series, specifically the protagonist Harry Potter and antagonist Lord Voldemort, embrace the notion of their death distinctively different from one another, a motif which is constant throughout the series. What do the lives and legacies of these two characters, and their perception and reaction toward the idea of their unavoidable fate, ethically teach *Harry Potter* enthusiasts on the looming subject of the afterlife and how it should or should not be greeted? Although J. K.

Rowling molded these two characters to share astonishing parallels between their lives and wizarding abilities, she distinguishes them by the very virtues they cherish and act upon throughout the series, displaying the ways in which they individually approach the essence of death is what truly sets them apart at their core, and what ultimately confirms who seizes the genuine title of the Master of Death.

The impression of death is overwhelmingly prominent in the *Harry Potter* series. The books are set in the early 1990s when a young boy named Harry Potter is left on the doorstep of his aunt and uncle's home in the suburbs of London, orphaned by his parents who were murdered by the most dangerous wizard of their time, Lord Voldemort. Throughout the series, *Harry Potter* readers follow Potter as he attempts to find his way through the wizarding world, which includes battling Lord Voldemort and dueling for his life in each book. In the fifth book, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, a prophecy which dates back to Harry's birth is exposed, one that explains Lord Voldemort's hostile motivation behind his constant pursuit to kill Harry Potter. The prophecy states that, "Neither can live while the other survives," a proclamation Lord Voldemort assumed related to the birth of Harry Potter (Rowling 841). Taking the prophecy quite literally, Lord Voldemort considered it to be his life mission to kill Harry Potter in the hopes of conquering his equal and living for eternity. Although the books include many alternative light-hearted moments, the series is mainly based upon two wizards who are determined to kill one another for the advancement of their own agenda (Harry Potter's mission was to bring peace to the wizarding world, while Lord Voldemort's lifework was to seize reign of the wizarding world for his own controlling and malice purposes). Throughout the series, readers are guided through a tour of both character's lives, dramatically showing their similarities as well as the powerful choices

Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort made which ultimately separates their sameness. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Albus Dumbledore, the Headmaster at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, urges Harry to understand that while he may have a connection with Lord Voldemort, “It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities,” (Rowling 333). The theme of choice versus action is paramount within the series, and despite each character’s possible demise, the ways in which Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort choose to approach their fate drastically differ one another, shedding light on how the idea of death can excessively vary between people and ultimately change the ways in which they act toward the interpretation of the afterlife.

Harry Potter was accustomed to the notion of death from a young age, many of which attributed to his mature manner toward handling the interpretation of dying. According to Lisa Olsen, author of *The Ethics of Albus Dumbledore: A Critical Discussion of Professor Dumbledore as a Moral Leader and Ideal in the Harry Potter Series*, “The many deaths Harry has experienced throughout the series, actually, help him become master of death.” Harry endured a handful of paramount deaths in his early years, including his parents, Lily and James Potter, Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape, Sirius Black, as well as countless others he knew throughout the wizarding world. These deaths, all of which were conducted by Lord Voldemort and his fellow Death Eaters (the name for Voldemort’s group of slavish, murderous followers) shaped Harry into the young man he became throughout the books, teaching him the value of love and bravery, along with the tough realization that the one thing magic cannot undo is death. Throughout Rowling’s career, she has been vocal about her fixation with death within the Potter series, and said in a 1999 interview with NPR’s talk show, *The Connection*, “One of the most important

things I decided was that magic cannot bring dead people back to life,” a theme which is fixed throughout the series. Despite the many hard-hitting deaths Harry experienced throughout his time, the ways in which he dealt with them is unique. At times, Harry grievously questions why the closest people in his life have passed, but he never lives his life in regret. Instead, he decides to live for the memory of those he lost and chooses to memorialize them in subtle, yet personal ways throughout his life. Understanding the prophecy, and aware that he may die at the hands of Lord Voldemort and his controlling power, the values Harry learned through the deaths of those closest to him ultimately shaped his view on his inevitable fate, giving him hope toward his afterlife, rather than fear. Olsen argues there was never a doubt that Harry would not embrace his fate, due to the extreme lengths Voldemort went to fulfill the prophecy and goes on to say, “He killed Harry’s parents, and tried to kill him. Regardless of the prophecy, Harry’s fate is to finish Voldemort, for his parents.” Harry realized early on that his destiny was uncertain, and learned to accept that he may never defeat Lord Voldemort. Before the death Albus Dumbledore, he reminds Harry that his greatest weapon against Lord Voldemort is the power of love, a virtue and protection Harry was given by his mother, Lily, before she was murdered by Lord Voldemort. John Killinger, author of *Love, Death and Friendship in the Harry Potter Novels*, insists that love is the reason why Harry can ultimately defeat Lord Voldemort in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, and says, “It is the reason Harry can walk calmly and deliberately into the maw of death and lay down his life.” Thus in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Harry selflessly and willingly walks into the forest to face Lord Voldemort in the hopes of ending their feud and sacrificing himself for the better of the wizarding world. Though only a piece of Harry’s soul

dies, instead of his entire being, he willingly chooses to come back to the mortal world to face Lord Voldemort for their final duel and successfully kills Voldemort once and for all.

Unlike Harry Potter, Lord Voldemort was adamant on the fact that he will live forever, and the very thought of his death is a notion he refused to accept. Throughout the series, *Harry Potter* readers are guided through Voldemort's heartbreaking background and his extreme appetite to become the world's most powerful wizard. Akin to Harry, Lord Voldemort was orphaned as a baby after his mother selfishly took her life and abandoned her newborn child, then known as Tom Riddle. Riddle was visited by Albus Dumbledore at Wool's Orphanage in London and was asked to accompany him to Hogwarts to learn to tame his magic for proper use. Somewhere along the way, Tom Riddle began his quest to become the world's most famed and deadly wizard, and from that moment on, Tom Riddle was forever known as Lord Voldemort. One month before the birth of Harry Potter, Voldemort was notified of the infamous prophecy and was rattled to learn that another wizard could rival his extreme powers. Voldemort quickly began creating seven Horcruxes (a memento fixed by Dark Magic in which a wizard intentionally hides a fragment of their soul to attain immortality), in the hopes he would hide his soul in everyday objects to eternally thrive and become such a force that Harry Potter could never triumph. Voldemort's intense commitment toward his immortal achievement is discussed by Manasi Saxena, author of *Death, the Last Enemy: Grief and Loss in the Harry Potter series*, who states, "Voldemort's creation of Horcruxes is a manifestation of this fear and yearning to conquer death." Although Saxena makes a solid point, I would add that Voldemort's creation of his seven Horcruxes is also due to his exhausting obsession and pure will to achieve immortal fame. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Voldemort is caught in a cursing crossfire with

Dumbledore, and shouts during their duel, “There is nothing worse than death.

Dumbledore!” (Rowling 814), showing Voldemort is more focused on preaching and reassuring others of his infatuation with death, versus protecting himself during a fierce duel. While Voldemort assumed the production of these Horcruxes would bind him to immortality, the underlying factor in the creation of these objects was his personal horror relating to death, and his arrogant confidence toward overpowering death as if it were another wizard in his way. Though it takes Harry some time to come to grips with his mortality, he does so by understanding that those before him willingly died for causes exceedingly greater than him, and accepts that his possible demise is yet another purpose that surpasses his own life for the greater good of the wizarding world. However, Voldemort’s constant anxiety of the afterlife inflames his malevolent actions as he strives to violate the fundamental laws of nature by constantly seeking to conquer death.

While Harry Potter ultimately succeeds and kills Voldemort in their final battle, Lord Voldemort mistakenly assumed his power could outsmart his distorted vision of death and died at the hands of the very power he sought his entire existence. He lived a life in fear of the unknown and tried to grasp any form of controlled power he could to offset the idea that one day he may surrender to death.

While neither character dealt with the topic perfectly, the ultimate fear of the unknown is something that crosses the minds of every person at some point in their lives. In an essay written by Andrea Stokilov, titled, *Life (and) Death in Harry Potter*, she argues that a person’s fear of death is the “ultimate emotion human beings can experience,” and goes on to say, “Rowling’s message is one of love transcending death. Every action stemming from love, friendship, care, and selflessness results in eternal life.” Although the overall theme of the *Harry Potter* series

may stem from the idea of death, Rowling does a solid job at reminding the reader that the strength of love will always dominate the fear of death. Throughout the series, it becomes clear that Harry Potter ultimately accepts the overall intention of death and is aware that the act itself is apart of life's grand cycle. These lessons were learned not only through the deaths of those closest to him, but by his constant need to remember those who died and his willingness to accept their love through the afterlife. This can be shown in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* when Harry uses the Resurrection Stone (a fabled stone thought to be crafted by Death himself to recover loved ones from the dead) to retrieve four beloved souls in the hopes that their eternal love and strength will aid him toward defeating Lord Voldemort. When Harry uses the Resurrection Stone to bring back his loved ones (notably his mother, father, Sirius Black, and Remus Lupin), he's not only reminded of their unwavering support and care for him, but he's reassured that the great beyond should not be feared, and is told they'll be waiting for him on the other side, giving Harry a new sense of confidence toward death. On the other hand, Voldemort solely lives for himself, and the idea that he has a crowd of loved ones and admirers waiting for him on the other side is quite far fetched. He lacks the ability to cherish or respect another, and his readiness to kill all that stand in his way is another example of how far he'll stretch his violent behavior to fasten his own immortality. Shawn Klein, author of *Harry Potter and Humanity: Choices, Love and Death*, suggests that Voldemort's infatuation with killing Harry originates from his unwavering appetite for control, and says,

[Voldemort] doesn't appear to have any desires, save one: immortality. Everything that

Voldemort is about, his power lust, his obsession with killing Harry, is instrumental to his

one goal of cheating death. It is in this context of Voldemort's refusal to accept his own mortality that we can begin to understand his evil.

Although it's difficult to proclaim which character approached the notion of death more effectively, it's important to note that while Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort had comparable backgrounds, the ways in which they dealt with their unavoidable fate is what truly set them apart. Voldemort rejected the very idea of humanity and valued his controlling power and lust for immortality above all, seeking more than just life, but eternal reign and glory over the wizarding world. This can be shown by a quote from *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, where Voldemort tries to convince Harry that there's no true difference between "good" and "evil," and goes on to say, "there is only power, and those too weak to seek it," (Rowling 211). Voldemort failed to understand that innumerable things in the world can offer a person a sense of power beyond any reach of magic, a truth he was never able to grasp. For Harry, his motive to defeat Lord Voldemort wasn't driven by fame but was inspired by bringing peace to the wizarding world at any cost, even if that meant dying for the very cause. Illustrated in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Dumbledore reassured Harry that his motives for wanting to destroy Lord Voldemort were derived from pure bravery, and goes on to say, "Perhaps those who are best suited to power are those who have never sought it. Those who, like you, have leadership thrust upon them, and take up the mantle because they must," (Rowling 718). Though both characters feared the idea of death at some point in their lives, Harry Potter acknowledged that his eventual death was necessary, whether that be at the hands of Lord Voldemort or at a more harmonious setting later on in his life. Conversely, Lord Voldemort never assumed he would perish, especially after his extreme



attempts to protect his soul for all of eternity, and therefore was never content with his life on earth as well as the idea of his afterlife.

In view of the fact that Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort treat the meaning of death completely separate from one another, it does not necessarily make one right over the other. Though many *Harry Potter* fans look to Harry's character for valuable life-lessons, I argue we can also learn something from Lord Voldemort and his actions throughout the series. Despite being a power-hungry tyrant, Lord Voldemort's actions toward death could be looked upon as an example of personal delusion, in the sense where he valued himself to a higher degree than the natural structure of life's cycle. What he failed to understand, and what Harry learned to grasp, is the concept of "dead" and "alive" does not make one more powerful than another, nor does it truly determine whether someone is legitimately dead. Lord Voldemort lacked a true sense of reality and failed to understand that the power of someone's legacy can last well beyond their death, creating a long-lasting memory that can be shared throughout history. Harry Potter understood that the memory of those who died before him, and their everlasting love for him, was a form of magic that surpassed the living and the dead, it was the true eternal testament that defeated death at its core. Although the books were written for the younger generations, the lessons learned throughout the series are genuine messages all may use throughout their lifetime, regardless of someone's age. Saxena believes the *Harry Potter* series may help readers through difficult life affairs, including the topic of death, and says, "The *Harry Potter* books offer us clues as to understanding grief and the process of mourning." This lesson can be shown through many parts of the series and mainly by way of Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry continued to mourn the loss of his parents and struggled with the idea as

to whether or not his parents would be proud of the young man he was growing to be. Like many times before, Dumbledore stepped in to comfort and encourage Harry that his choices were sincere, and said, “Your father is alive in you, Harry, and shows himself most plainly when you need of him,” (Rowling 427). By encouraging messages as such, Harry learned to grieve his lost loved ones and live a life that would make his parents proud of the young man he became. On the other hand, Lord Voldemort never allowed himself the opportunity to mourn and grieve the losses he sustained throughout his life, therefore creating a wall of anger and denial around the very topic of death and bereavement. In a rare quote by Lord Voldemort on the topic of his estranged and deceased family, he harshly speaks of his father in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, and says, “Surely you didn’t think I was going to keep my filthy Muggle father’s name?” (Rowling 211). The very thought of his father and the family name (Riddle) fashioned pure anger and despise out of Lord Voldemort, displaying his absolute hatred toward his own flesh and blood. While one can only assume why Tom Riddle turned into Lord Voldemort, it’s safe to consider that Voldemort’s lack of empathy spawned from his shortage of love as an abandoned child, therefore creating a sense of outrage that lasted throughout his life. The influence of genuine love and sacrifice through Lily Potter is what kept Harry alive and what ultimately guided Harry into understanding the notion of death, a virtue Tom Riddle was never provided. J. K. Rowling created Lord Voldemort to become the villain who is terrifying for his unwillingness to face his personal tragedies and to accept the sadness of his childhood and move forward with grace and forgiveness. However, Harry Potter was able to overcome his individual tragedies through sheer determination to accept the overwhelming sadness and anger he faced throughout his childhood while learning to embrace the virtue of forgiveness.

Still, what fueled Lord Voldemort to despise Harry Potter to such a degree? Was it the idea from the prophecy that another would be born and one day rival his dominant powers or was it the notion that Harry Potter was everything Tom Riddle once was but transcended his powers by the influence of love? This belief can be displayed by a quote from the film *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, where Harry, Lord Voldemort and Dumbledore duel in the atrium of the Ministry of Magic, and Harry shouts to Lord Voldemort, “You're the one who is weak. You will never know love or friendship. And I feel sorry for you.” Harry’s recognition of death came from the valuable friendships and love that spawned not only from his mother’s sacrifice but from others in the wizarding community who supported him throughout his journey. Olsen suggests that sorrow drove Voldemort away from Harry during their duel, and goes on to say, “Love is the reason why Voldemort could not stand to be in contact with Harry’s soul when he tried to possess him in *Order of the Phoenix*.” It’s important to note that Tom Riddle’s conception was under a powerful love potion his mother put upon his father, rather than being conceived out of true love similar to Harry Potter’s beginnings. Voldemort’s frustration with the notion of love most likely derived from the fact that he was born and raised under fictitious circumstances, and never enjoyed an upbringing surrounded by truth and love. His lack of understanding the basic principles of love lead him to never appreciate the honest meaning of it, leading him to purge the very feeling of love altogether. However, Harry came to learn that grief and love go hand-in-hand, and the idea of grievance stems from a love for one another. One cannot feel sorrow without the power of love, something Voldemort never felt when he killed or hunted his next victim. Lord Voldemort assumed his power could overtake the virtues of love and friendship, but what

he failed to recognize is that power only lasts as long as its commander is in charge, but true love transcends lifetimes.

Thus, what does the title of the Master of Death truly entail, and which character was fortunate enough to possess the crowning title for himself? While many would agree that Harry Potter is the true Master of Death, I would argue that both characters are worthy of the reputation. Harry Potter became the Master of Death because he logically outsmarted Lord Voldemort's vision of power and death. Harry found and destroyed all of Voldemort's seven Horcruxes, and eventually possessed all three objects in the famed Deathly Hallows (The Master of Death is the one who has in their possession all three of the legendary Deathly Hallows: the Elder Wand, Resurrection Stone, and Cloak of Invisibility), all of which helped him defeat Lord Voldemort. On the other hand, Lord Voldemort held the title for all seven books and before, due to his sheer lust for eternal glory as well as his extreme measures to achieve his immortal goal. Though Voldemort's intentions were atrocious, he developed into the Master of Death in a way the wizarding world had never seen, something many thought was not even achievable. In Voldemort's crazed attempt to become the Master of Death, he subsequently forced Harry into the title itself, focusing on his need to kill rather than his want for eternal life.

At last, how does one go about facing the reality of death? As Dumbledore proclaimed in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, "To the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure" (Rowling 297), or is it merely a moment in time when our lives end and the memory of us begins? While many see Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort as polar opposites, behind their bold and fearless exteriors lies two innocent orphans who were born and bred around the harsh reality of death, struggling to discover not only themselves but their true purpose in

life. Though they ultimately chose contrasting paths to follow throughout their time, the choices both Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort made along the way is what ultimately sealed their inescapable fate. The series demonstrates that love and bravery is the answer to life's most difficult questions and circumstances, but the broader picture shows *Harry Potter* readers that one's attitude toward the afterlife is what truly determines how we will eventually greet death and depart this life as equals alongside it. This is the very concept Lord Voldemort could never grasp: no matter how much one may fear the concept of death, sooner or later it will come for us all. Harry Potter understood that death was inevitable, and recognized that the only thing magic cannot fully retrieve or prolong is life. Death does not discriminate, and the more one dwells upon the very thought of it, the more one forgets to genuinely live in the moment. The *Harry Potter* series demonstrates to its readers that those who honestly trust and perceive death as a natural part of life's cycle will handle it with dignity and welcome the notion not as a lifelong enemy, but as an old friend.

## Works Cited

- Killinger, J. *Love, Death, and Friendship in the Harry Potter Novels*. Baylor University, 2008.
- Klein, S. *Harry Potter and Humanity: Choices, Love and Death*. Reason Papers, Vol. 34, no. 1. Rockford College. Accessed on March 20, 2017.
- Olsen, L. *The Ethics of Albus Dumbledore: A Critical Discussion of Professor Dumbledore as a Moral Leader and Ideal in the Harry Potter Series*. The University of Oslo, 2013.
- Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Scholastic, 1998.
- Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Scholastic, 2007.
- Rowling, J.K. *Interview with The Connection* (WBUR Radio). 1999.
- Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Scholastic, 2003.
- Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. Scholastic, 1997.
- Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. Scholastic, 1999.
- Saxena, M. *Death, the Last Enemy: Grief and Loss in the Harry Potter series*. JNU, New Dehli. Accessed on, March 20, 2017.
- Stojulkov, A. *Life (and) death in Harry Potter: The Immortality of Love and Soul*. June, 2015. Mosaic: a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature. Volume 48, no. 2.
- Yates, David, Director. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Warner Bros. Studio, 2007.