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“Well, well, Mr. Potter, the whole thing starts with
"The Tale of the Three Brothers.” - Xenophilius Lovegood

Harry Potter and The Tale of the Three Brothers

For decades, the *Harry Potter* series has provided its global readers with essential life-lessons some may use throughout their existence, 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 experiences 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 encounters. 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. Indeed, the routes both Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort take to defend themselves against the looming powers of death ultimately fall upon a timeworn wizarding tale found within the beloved book, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. Although this popular fairy tale was thought to be a young wizards narrative, “The Tale of the Three Brothers,” the last fable within *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, proved to be the missing piece in Harry

Potter's quest to defeat Lord Voldemort and subsequently find the legendary Deathly Hallows. As a result of this pivotal understanding behind "The Tale of the Three Brothers," Harry Potter was finally able to outsmart and vanquish Lord Voldemort for good; saving the greater wizarding world and shaping the outcome of a new generation for all through the means of this venerable children's fairy tale.

"The Tale of the Three Brothers" is an ancient wizarding myth based upon the legendary Peverell family and their three sons who are thought to have been the original owners of the Deathly Hallows. Although many people within the wizarding world presume the Deathly Hallows to be a tale created by Beedle The Bard himself, wizards such as Lord Voldemort, Albus Dumbledore, and Xenophilius Lovegood had spent their entire lives trying to find and collect these famed items (each wizard having different motives behind their lust for these superhuman powers). The Deathly Hallows consists of The Elder Wand, The Resurrection Stone, and The Cloak of Invisibility, and together they make one the true 'Master of Death,' (Pottermore). The story chronicles three brothers, who one evening shockingly elude a trap constructed by Death himself, and while the hooded figure was surprised at first, Death was devious and, "Pretended to congratulate the three brothers upon their magic, and said that each had earned a prize for having been clever enough to evade him," (Rowling 89). Antioch, the arrogant first brother, "Asked Death 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 who had conquered Death!" (Rowling 89). So, Death created a wand from a nearby elder tree for the first brother and handed it to him in all his glory. The second brother, Cadmus, was a malicious man and asked Death to forge a piece that had, "The power to recall others from Death," and Death obliged and chose a stone from the riverbank,

producing The Resurrection Stone (Rowling 90). Ignotus, the third and most humble of brothers, distrusted Death and his eerie motives, and, “Asked for something that would enable him to go forth from that place without being followed by Death,” (Rowling 90). Although Death hesitated at first, he reluctantly handed the third brother his hooded Cloak of Invisibility and told the brothers they could leave him in peace, and so they did, “Talking with wonder of the adventure they had had, and admiring Death’s gifts,” (Rowling 91).

Eventually, the three brothers parted ways from their grand adventure; all while clutching their newfound treasures gifted from Death. The first brother took advantage of his beloved death stick and hunted down a fellow wizard with whom he’d had a previous squabble. Antioch killed the man and afterward boasted about The Elder Wand at a nearby inn, proclaiming his wand was a product from Death himself and that he was an unstoppable force to never be reckoned with. However, that same evening, “Another wizard crept upon the older brother as he lay, wine-sodden, upon his bed. The thief took the wand and, for good measure, slit the oldest brother’s throat... And so Death took the first brother for his own” (Rowling 91). The second brother, Cadmus, traveled home to a house where he lived alone and turned The Resurrection Stone three times in his hand. To his astonishment, “The figure of the girl he had once hoped to marry before her untimely death, appeared at once before him,” however, she was a shell of her former self and the second brother could no longer bear to see her ghostly figure in his realm (Rowling 92). Thus, the second brother killed himself as he was overcome by paranoia and agony, in the hopes of returning to his long-lost love in the afterlife; once again, Death took the second brother for himself. Still, Death could not find the third and smartest brother, Ignotus, for he had given the third brother a gift that hid him from Death’s cunning ways. It wasn’t until the third brother

reached an old age that he, “Finally took off the Cloak of Invisibility and gave it to his son. And then he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, equals, they departed this life,” (Rowling 93).

This seemingly innocent children’s fable jolted Harry Potter, as readers begin to understand his immediate comprehension of “The Tale of the Three Brothers” and its crucial relevance to Harry’s overall mission to end Lord Voldemort. For it was this exact moment within the series where Harry grasps the notion that the Deathly Hallows are indeed the famed items alluded to within “The Tale of the Three Brothers,” creating a major sense of urgency to collect the infamous Elder Wand and Resurrection Stone. Alternatively, the Cloak of Invisibility had been in Harry’s possession since *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, a gift which was bestowed to Harry by Professor Dumbledore (who originally received the cloak from Harry’s father, James, before he was murdered by Lord Voldemort), offering Harry an immediate advantage over Lord Voldemort and his evil quest to conquer the wizarding world through these items. Shawn Klein, author of *Harry Potter and Humanity: Choices, Love and Death*, suggests that Voldemort’s infatuation with killing Harry and reigning supreme over the wizarding world 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. (36)

Moreover, Harry is, at first, the only character to see through the innocence of “The Tale of the Three Brothers,” and connect it back to Lord Voldemort’s overall crusade toward immortality

and dominance. In fact, many *Harry Potter* fans attribute this immediate connection to Harry's ability to sense Lord Voldemort's thoughts via their strong, life-long attachment, however, as we see in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Harry's fascination with the essence of conquering Lord Voldemort had him obsessively paranoid about defeating him for good, spawning more than just a connection between the two, but a personal mission Harry felt as though he must accomplish. The dire circumstances surrounding the Deathly Hallows shook Harry to his core, and his yearning to compile the Hallows and save the wizarding world after hearing "The Tale of the Three Brothers" is shown through the narrative within *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, as the text reads:

"But Harry hardly slept that night. The idea of the Deathly Hallows had taken possession of him, and he could not rest while agitating thoughts whirled through his mind: the wand, the stone, and the Cloak, if he could just possess them all..." (Rowling 434)

For this reason, Harry's ambition to interpret "The Tale of the Three Brothers," and locate the Deathly Hallows before Voldemort, was the wizarding world's saving grace, because, without Harry's extreme motivation and keen understanding of what he must accomplish, Lord Voldemort would have most certainly risen to power once more. Daniel Mitchell, the author of *The Magic of Harry Potter*, suggests that Harry's inclination for answers and overall victory is, "Wrapped up in a paradox," surrounding the concept of death related to "The Tale of the Three Brothers," (91). Mitchell goes on to say, "One fairly obvious interpretation [of 'The Tale of the Three Brothers'] is that when we no longer fear death, having already embraced it, we can truly live. This is a key element in understanding *Harry Potter*," (Mitchell 94). Thus, while both Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort's understanding of "The Tale of the Three Brothers" may have been

identical, the ways in which they interpreted the story, and its possible global effect on the wizarding world, is where they greatly differed. Lord Voldemort's life mission was based upon his lust for immortality and world dominance, a theme that readers saw throughout the *Harry Potter* series. 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 may offer a person a sense of power beyond the reach of magic, a truth he was never able to grasp. Because of this, Lord Voldemort's ultimate quest to obtain the Deathly Hallows spawned a life-long battle within himself; a personal warfare that manifested the one thing he was afraid of the most: death.

Manasi Saxena, author of *Death, the Last Enemy: Grief and Loss in the Harry Potter series*, discusses the encompassing fear surrounding the Deathly Hallows, and states, "[The Deathly Hallows] can be seen as elaborate metaphors for escaping fear: the Wand especially to conquer the objects of one's fears, the Stone to not have to let go of dead loved ones, and the Cloak potentially to hide, spy, and to be invisible," (10). While Voldemort assumed the capture and ownership of these items would bind him to immortality, the underlying impulse for these objects was generated by his intimate horror relating to death, and his arrogant confidence toward overpowering mortality as if it were another wizard in his way. Conversely, Harry's driving force behind cracking "The Tale of the Three Brothers" underlying code was based upon his yearning for peace, not just for himself, but the greater wizarding world. Throughout the series, it becomes clear that Harry Potter ultimately accepts the intention of his eventual death and is aware that the act itself is apart of life's grand cycle. This mature understanding of death

from Harry's point of view is eerily similar to Ignotus, the third brother within "The Tale of the Three Brothers," who knew he would eventually take off the Cloak of Invisibility and willingly greet Death after a long, prosperous life. 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," (139). Harry understood that he may never defeat Lord Voldemort, even if he becomes the Master of Death by collecting all three Deathly Hallows, however, he continues his journey because of love, not due to a fear of death. This is what ultimately sets him apart from Lord Voldemort the most and makes him, alike Ignotus, the true Master of Death.

Thus, what does the title of the Master of Death from "The Tale of the Three Brothers" truly entail, and which character was fortunate enough to possess the crowning title for himself? While many would agree that Harry Potter is the only Master of Death, one could argue both characters are worthy of the reputation. Chiefly, Harry Potter became the Master of Death because he logically outsmarted Lord Voldemort's vision of power and greed for immortality. Harry found and utilized all three Deathly Hallows in a manner which conclusively conquered Lord Voldemort to his eventual demise, and above all, risked his life to the fullest extent to rescue the wizarding world from the purest form of evil ever known. On the other hand, Lord Voldemort held the title for all seven books, due to his sheer lust for eternal glory, as well as his extreme measures to achieve his immortal goal through the means of these three essential Hallows. Though Voldemort's intentions were atrocious, he developed into the Master of Death in a way the wizarding world had never seen, a belief 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; in the end, focusing more on his need to kill and vanquish rather than his appetite for eternal life. In a strange twist of events, it's as if Voldemort channeled the first two brothers within the tale from *Beedle the Bard*, and heavily fixated on dominance (similar to the first brother) and his timelessness (comparable to the second brother) instead of the overall lesson the story was trying to convey. At the close, Harry Potter (along with the third brother) understood that death, no matter how hard one tries to escape him, will always find you in the end, whether or not we choose to greet him as an old friend or foe. For this justification alone is much greater than the moral of a children's fairy tale, it's the sole reason why Harry Potter and the wizarding world prevailed thanks to the knowledge that death will always outwit magic.

At last, how does one go about facing the reality of death? As Professor 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? Although *Beedle the Bard's* "The Tale of the Three Brothers" was mainly treated as a fairy tale which illustrated three distinct approaches to the concept of death, those who saw beyond the words on the page, alike Harry Potter, understood the hidden meanings behind the three brothers and their life choices concerning their eventual mortality. Albeit Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort chose contrasting paths to follow throughout their time, the choices both characters made along the way are what ultimately sealed their inescapable fate, a motif that is wholly indistinguishable to "The Tale of the Three Brothers". The series demonstrates that love and bravery are 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. Unlike Lord Voldemort and the first two brothers within “The Tale of the Three Brothers,” Harry Potter (as well as the third brother) understood that death was inescapable, and recognized firsthand 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 companions departing the mortal world together.

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