

Delineation of Death and Immortality in Harry Potter

Navi

After all to the well-organised mind, death is but the next great adventure.¹

____ *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*

You know my goal ____ to conquer death.²

____ *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

Death is no less a subject of interest when life itself is a waking dream; a dream which none of us would wish to break soon. This dream is pleasant to us but 'what dreams we may have when we have shuffled off this mortal coil' is the cardinal problem. Death and the search for immortality here come confronting each-other. J. K. Rowling has certainly a lot to do with death as a strong theme of her books as she says:

My books are largely about death. They open with the death of Harry's parents. There is Voldemort's obsession with conquering death and his quest for immortality at any price, the goal for anyone with magic, I so understand why Voldemort wants to conquer death. We're all frightened of it.³

To discuss and deal with death is to discuss and deal with the biggest apprehension in life. But Rowling goes as far as making this fear vivid to us with an almost cathartic effect. Her characters put forth their subconscious fear of death instinctively and she makes no attempt of any sort of bravery if they show what they feel.

The outset of the story brings to us the one year old little baby Harry who has lost both of his parents at the cruel hands of Lord Voldemort. Not only this, Harry himself has a narrow escape in that fatal onslaught on his parents. The protagonist Harry enters the scene with deaths already set in the background denoting the dominance of death throughout the Series. Death pervades the atmosphere. It makes the power of death so obviously greater than the Dark Lord himself that he, who terrorizes people with his dark magic, is himself terrified by this eternal law of nature. Voldemort's fear of death drives him mad to the extent that he recklessly kills people only to pave his path to immortality. But Harry faces death time and again, only to shatter Voldemort's evil designs. Hence, there arises a contest

¹ *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, p.215.

² *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, p.566.

³ "Coping with Fame and Death", *The Hindu*, Jan. 11, 2006.

between death and immortality. The evil lord is restless to attain immortality rejecting the law of nature while Harry is much aware of the truth that death is the ultimate fate of all mortals. The acceptance of truth makes Harry stay human but the neglect of it debases Voldemort. He can commit any heinous crime to fulfill his burning desire that consumes him at length. In this light his struggle exposes only the latent desire of man to befool death but also the sinister motives like that of Voldemort to harm humanity for selfish interests. Harry stands against this vehemence and by virtue of his self-effacing and sacrificing soul upholds fearlessness of a true human being. The difference is candid — ‘Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price.’⁴

Thus Voldemort goes through ‘a half-life, a cursed life’⁵ a life more terrible than death only in the hope to rejuvenate, to come back to his own by defeating death once for all. In this maddening pursuit, he loses all that is essential for a worthy existence — love, compassion, fraternity and above all humanity.

In a striking contrast, Voldemort appears a stubborn bullying child who wants everything at his feet and Harry is akin to a grown-up to whom life has put her secrets open because he understands and respects her. Voldemort’s perspective of death leads him to his own destruction but Harry can choose death at his will to save the lives of those he loves. Death is the dread of Voldemort but to Harry it is nothing more than an indispensable truth which he has to embrace to save many innocent lives.

None of Rowling’s books remain free from death. In *The Chamber of Secrets*, there is Moaning Myrtle, the ghost of a girl-student that resides in the girls’ toilet. The Basilisk nearly kills some students however; they are resumed to life because the attacks were somewhat less deadly than they could have proved.

In the first three novels of the series Rowling seems to thwart death. But it is still a fact that Rowling tries not to portray death in utter falsehood, it is only to uphold justice that the death scenes are reverted and probably because it was not the right time to remove the last shelter of hope i.e. Sirius from Harry. All the more she seems to be preparing the reader giving him a sudden jolt of grief and an abrupt reconciliation of happiness for the starker catastrophe in the culminating novels. Therefore, this bizarre and purely fantasized reversal of events, produces a wholesome

⁴ *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, p.188.

⁵ *Ibid.*

effect of contentment in place of bewilderment, though with an uncanny sense of darkness looming around.

The Goblet of Fire gives us the real shock of rapid deaths, which confirms that death is going to grip tighter ahead. The fears in the previous books are now laid bare in the form of more than half a dozen cold blooded murders. The novel opens with the deaths of the three Riddles and old Frank and proceeds with the rising death toll in the form of Mr. Barty Crouch, a minister and a desperate father; Crouch Jr, an ill-turned son, and Bertha Jorkins, a woman working for the ministry. Finally the course comes to a halt with the death of Cedric Diggory, the Hogwarts champion for the Triwizard Tournament. Rowling describes how the coldness injected in the air with the exposition of deaths is felt on nerves throughout the book:

...fifty years before, at daybreak on a fine summer morning, when the Riddle house had still been well kept and impressive, and a maid had entered the drawing room to find all three Riddles dead.

...Lying there with their eyes wide open! Cold as ice! Still in their dinner things.⁶

For the first time Harry witnesses right in front of him the loss of an innocent life. The reticent death of Cedric leaves Harry speechless and empty in numb disbelief:

For a second that contained an eternity, Harry stared into Cedric's face, at his open gray eyes, blank and expressionless as the windows of a deserted house, at his half-open mouth which looked slightly surprised.⁷

Cedric's lifeless body conveys even the surprise of his sudden wind up. Cedric's sudden departure affirms the transience of life, how the spirited youth who was playing enthusiastically with Harry to win the Triwizard Cup seconds before now lies on the ground; his body nothing but an empty shell. Yet obsessed Voldemort unfailingly nurtures his quest for immortality stepping up mercilessly at the piles of bodies of those whom he delivered premature death in order to flee himself from its clutches. He even ignores what terrible price his own life has to pay in the bargain as he says, 'I was ripped from my body, I was less than spiritless than the meanest ghost...but still I was alive. What I was even I do not know...'⁸

⁶ *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, p.07.

⁷ *Ibid*, pp.553-554.

⁸ *Ibid*, p.556.

Blind after his unrequited target he rather expresses madness for ever growing thirst for immortal existence, howsoever devilish it may be: ‘... I, who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality. You know my goal--to conquer death.’⁹

Voldemort tries to defeat death up to the end of the series but death remains what it is ___ an inevitable truth which impartially treats all muggles or wizards alike. Sean Harris points out in his biography of Rowling, ‘One of the most interesting features of Harry Potter saga is that characters can die. Magic cannot cheat death’.¹⁰ Even Rowling has Dumbledore to speak the truth curtly ___ ‘No spell can reawaken the dead.’¹¹ This is the truth that everyone has to be accustomed to but what puzzles Voldemort by the very end of the series.

The traces of his stubbornness are well explored in his disturbed childhood. A child angry with his ruthless muggle father who deserted his pregnant mother, Voldemort is all the more frustrated at his wizard mother’s surrender to death while giving him birth. He looks at his father as a weak man because he was a muggle and his mother as weak woman because he succumbed to human weakness despite being a witch. It is perhaps this hatred simmering in him due to his association with a muggle that makes Tom Morvolo Riddle shed his identity and create his own-- ‘Voldemort.’ His disgust towards his parents reflects his attitude towards life which reveals that he holds human frailties as the reason that checks humans to defeat death. He develops a strong impulse to gain absolute power to achieve an immortal existence, and the only medium, the dark magic, slowly overpowers his senses.

Eventually all his signs of delinquency shape his devilish nature which gradually report his incomprehension of life as well as death. Love for dark powers and subsequently the assumption that they will lead him to perennial life turns Voldemort into a grown-up who fails to grow up in the human sense. Voldemort develops more as a psychopath as Rowling explains in an interview, “I am writing about shades of evil. You have Voldemort, a raging psychopath, devoid of the normal human responses to other people’s suffering, and there are people like that in the world.”¹²

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Smith, Sean, *J.K. Rowling: A Biography*, London: Michael O’Mara Books Ltd., 2001, p.215.

¹¹ *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, p.605.

¹² “Rowling Thunder (Parts 1 and 2),” *Entertainment Weekly*, August 4, 2000

Afraid of the inexplicable power of infant Harry, Voldemort utterly neglects the former's real strength of acceptance and humanity. He fails to notice why his contender, the twelve year old boy Harry, who stands in odd contrast to his own age, is so fearless and determined to thwart his evil motives. Harry's human ability to recognize the inevitability of death is the enigma of inhuman Voldemort. Here Rowling again strikes a serious note in her fantasy as Voldemort's incomprehension of death emerges as one of the bland and stark reasons behind his choosing the path of destruction rather than selecting peace and acceptance.

The Order of the Phoenix and *The Half-Blood Prince* both are overshadowed by death. The Dementor's attack on Dudley and Harry increases the gloom and depression. Harry saves the situation but we get to know in the seventh novel how this narrow escape from death changes Dudley's attitude to a great extent. We get a fine glimpse of the lesson that death can teach man as Dudley who would use Harry as his 'punchbag'¹³ finally turns caring to him. On the other hand the very thought of peril to her family makes the life of Molly Weasley miserable. As the Boggart takes before her the shape of the dead bodies of her family members her usual sense of courage breaks and she falls a prey to the false imitation of the Boggart. Her dormant fears at once comes to surface and she bursts into tears confessing how she was living every moment under the threat of losing anyone of her family members ever since the war finally broke against Voldemort.

At the outset of *The Half-Blood Prince*, Bellatrix Lestrange kills an innocent fox with such an indifference and cold-bloodedness as if it were a lifeless object. Likewise, the assassination of Albus Dumbledore, a towering figure of the series brings the reader to his senses that even a man of such greatness has to resign to the will of death. The novel also includes the story of our own terror-stricken times where death lurks more unpredictably among living beings. Both the magical and the real world seem alike before death.

Death grows heavier and denser towards the climax. It runs at double pace stealing more lives. The seventh novel, *The Deathly Hallows*, becomes a final document on the eternal issues of life, death and immortality as the three powerful Hallows stand for this trio. A cursory glance at the working of death and quest for immortality in *Harry Potter* prepares the ground for the better understanding of Rowling's perspective. But death is not all murder and assassination in the series. Though, it is true that natural death is rare to be found in these books, there are people who die untimely deaths due to their fate or blunders than the wrath of

¹³ *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, p.20.

their foes. The few instances include Harry's Evan grandparents and the Flamels who die natural deaths. On the advice of Dumbledore Nicholas Flamel and his wife Perenelle agree to set on their last journey finally as they decide to destroy the Philosopher's Stone, a source of eternal life to them only to save it from misuse by Voldemort.

It is more a hidden grief in their lives that drag them to their last breath. Helena Ravenclaw's betrayal and absconding leaves her mother in the lurch which leads her to death. The mother of Voldemort dies with a broken heart. The loss of her husband's love and the pain of an unsuccessful marriage dishearten her and even the birth of her new-born fails to revive in her a desire to live. Likewise, in the hope of meeting his dead parents and sister by means of the Resurrection Stone, even Dumbledore becomes the victim of its curse that cuts short his life to less than a year.

The woes of the Lovegoods are painfully tragic. Though at first glance both Loona and her father Xenophilus Lovegood seem awfully absurd and funny in their strange interests and inventions, the truth dawns upon the reader when he finds how both the daughter and father suffer silently the tragic fate of their little family. At the mere age of nine Loona learns to cope with the grief of losing her mother and becomes the only relief to her father. The acceptance of the truth makes her wisely and hopefully admit, 'Yes, it was horrible...I still feel very sad about it sometimes. But I've still got Dad.'¹⁴ Whatever the cause, the aftermath of the loss is a greater suffering for the people left to mourn that loss as we see how badly the deaths of their near ones affect the lives of Albus, Aberforth, Harry, Luna and even Tom Riddle who later becomes the Dark Lord.

The reason of not presenting death elaborately in the context of a natural phenomenon as of age and disease factor must be the tragic intensity and unpredictability of the matter that Rowling tends to emphasise more. Her emphasis is more on the increasing vulnerability of man in modern life-threatening conditions wherein the horror of sudden death looms large. She takes to reveal the real-life traumas resulting from an unpredictable fate of life that man is more prone to in the modern world. The unnatural and unexpected advent of death is put to our eyes as the muggle Prime Minister is unable to understand the whole chaotic atmosphere:

The bridge was less than ten years old, and the best experts were at loss to explain why it snapped cleanly in two, sending a dozen cars into the watery depths of the river below. And how dared anyone

¹⁴ *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, p.760.

suggest that it was lack of policeman that had resulted in those two very nasty and well publicised murders? Or that the government should have somehow foreseen the freak hurricane in the West Country that had caused so much damage to both people and property?...The Prime Minister felt it himself; people really did seem more miserable than usual...¹⁵

The wizard Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge explains to the muggle Prime Minister that the mishappenings were caused by the dark lord, but if seen on a realistic platform they mirror man's fate in the modern world where life has become more transient than ever.

The matter of life and death in Harry Potter moves beyond the apparent struggle of man between life and death and his quest for immortality. There is another dimension of Rowling's exploration. The presence of ghosts in the books reveals more of her intentions. The ghosts of Hogwarts specifically, Nearly Headless Nick, the Bloody Baron, the Friar and the Gray Lady serve greater roles than they appear to be playing. They are there not just to create supernatural effect or for comic relief they often provide; behind their very presence is the deep concern of the writer for the unresolved mysteries of life, death and immortality. In *The Order of the Phoenix* when Harry loses his god-father Sirius Black, in desperation he is suddenly struck with the idea that Sirius might return to him as a ghost almost like Nearly Headless Nick, the ghost of his house Gryffindor. Here Nick emerges as Rowling's mouthpiece. Nick understands Harry's depressed feelings, 'Oh, very well...I can't pretend I haven't been expecting it' and explains -'It happens, sometimes...when somebody has suffered a... loss.'¹⁶ Nick tells Harry that 'wizards can leave an imprint of themselves upon the earth, to walk palely where their living selves once trod'. He asserts 'But very few wizards choose that path.'¹⁷ He tells Harry that Sirius will not return that 'he will have... gone on'¹⁸

But Nick's further remark sheds light on the complexity of the matter when perplexed Harry expects a more reasonable reply from him. As Harry asks, 'What d'you mean, "gone on"? ...Gone on where? Listen—what happens when you die, anyway? Where do you go? Why doesn't everyone

¹⁵ Rowling, J.K., *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, London: Bloomsbury Pub., 2006 (2005), pp.07-08

¹⁶ *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, pp.757-758.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.758.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.759.

come back? Why isn't this place full of ghosts? Why--?'¹⁹ But Nick has no answer:

I was afraid of death...I chose to remain behind. I sometimes wonder whether I oughtn't to have...well, that is neither here nor there...in fact, I am neither here nor there...I know nothing of the secrets of death, Harry, for I chose my feeble imitation of life instead. I believe learned wizards study the matter in the Department of Mysteries—²⁰

Further Luna hints at the existence of soul free from body when she reminds Harry of the voices they heard behind the veil in the room with the archway in the Department of Mysteries:

Oh, come on. You heard them, just behind the veil didn't you? You mean... In that room with the archway. They were just lurking out of sight, that's all. You heard them.²¹

Here again we find that Rowling treats the matter prevaricately as Luna almost always comes up with incredible things and extra-ordinary ideas. But it is a fact that at times she proves to be very true in her beliefs as is the case when she tells Harry why only they two could see the Thestrals and others could not — because only those who have seen death can see them.

Though in an interview Rowling revealed that the veil “is the divide between life and death...You can't go back if you pass through that veil, you can't come back...”²² But at the same time she maintained,

“But when they surround that veil [in Order of the Phoenix],I was trying to show that depending on their degree of skepticism or belief about what lay beyond-because Luna, of course, is a very spiritual character.Luna believes firmly in afterlife.she's very clear on that. And she feels them speaking or hears them speaking more clearly than Harry does. This is the idea of faith...”²³

And finally she herself accepts, “Do I believe you go on? Yes, I do believe you go on. I do believe in an afterlife, although I'm absolutely doubt-ridden and always have been but there you are.”²⁴

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid*, p.761.

²² harryahistory.com/2008/09/more-about-the-veil.html

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

It is obvious that Rowling escapes to express her view with authority and leaves the readers to ponder over the issue. Moreover we have Nick's belief that 'learned wizards study the matter in the Department of Mysteries' which surely is an indication that in real life too the matter is under study by various philosophers of great caliber.

Rowling's misty ideas in the matter finds more light in a very illuminating book *Life Beyond Death* by a great philosopher, Swami Abhedanand, whose revealing lectures on the matter take ample scientific assumptions in the light of some of the most ancient scriptures, including 'the most universal and the most unsectarian' Vedanta.²⁵

He points out, 'It (Vedanta) tells us that soul...is separable from the body and exists independent of the body. It possesses the sense powers, life-force, mind and intellect as well as the impressions of its physical and mental activities...'²⁶ Though there is no direct acceptance of it in *Harry Potter* yet when Rowling calls the floating figures of Nearly Headless Nick or the Bloody Baron as 'ghosts' and Nick calls himself 'a feeble imitation of life', it indicates the presence of soul even as mere 'imprint' left of the people on the earth 'where their living selves once trod'. These talking ghosts of Hogwarts possess 'mind and intellect' and 'the impressions' of their 'physical and mental activities' for instance the ghost of Helena Ravenclaw i. e. the Grey Lady remembers how she betrayed her mother and was killed by the Baron (known as the Bloody Baron).

Often Nearly Headless Nick shows his pining for the pleasure of having food like the students at Hogwarts as he is not able to get being a ghost: 'That does look good...I haven't eaten for nearly four hundred years... I don't need to, of course, but one does miss it...'²⁷ But in the chapter The Deathday Party in The Chamber of Secrets we see the ghosts partying with sufficient food stock, though all rotten and stinking 'to give it a stronger flavour'²⁸ and they could only get through it to taste it 'almost' This condition of the souls of the dead is more logically defined by Swamiji as:

The realm beyond death is the realm of the realized ideals, or of the realized thoughts. If we think of a piece of bread, the bread is there

²⁵ Abhedanand, Swami, *Life Beyond Death*, Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 2000, p.92.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, p.

²⁸ *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, p.102.

and we will eat. If we feel hungry we are eating. If we think of coffee, we are drinking coffee. Thus we see how important it is for us to understand this that if we die with the attachment to any particular kind of food, or any particular kind of clothes or jewels, or anything in this life, we carry that attachment with us, and with our desire we manufacture those things out of the finer material in the spirit world.²⁹

He further opines the continuance of this state of such soul:

...But many of the departed spirits remain in that state of delusion for a long time. Our time does not affect the spirits. Our thousand years may be five days to them, because ours is according to our standard and theirs according to their standard. No one can say how long a soul will remain in any particular condition...³⁰

Again these revelations fit to the ghosts in Hogwarts as all the ghosts carry in their hearts their cherished desires or some 'attachment' of their past life when they were alive. Prof. Binns, the only ghost who teaches at Hogwarts, must have been deeply devoted to his profession at the time when 'he had fallen asleep in front of the staff-room fire and got up next morning to teach, leaving his body behind him'³¹ and Sir Cadogan, the ghost of a knight as we find him 'in his suit of armour'³² is always in search of a quest. Likewise the Bloody Baron who killed 'wears the chains as an act of penitence...'³³ even after death due to his feeling of remorse that he killed the woman he loved.

The best of Rowling's ideas and opinions about life and death seem to sum up in the seventh and final novel when Dumbledore shares with Harry his philosophy of life and death in the chapter *King's Cross*. The truth dawns upon Harry as well as the reader that death cannot be a bigger concern when life itself has many secrets to unfold before us and in this spirit Voldemort's desire for immortality seems futile. With a tinge of morality Rowling imagines a peaceful and holy departure to the good and selfless people as we find in almost near-death experience of Harry when he finds himself with Dumbledore at a strange place full of peace. On the other hand in the form of 'a naked child, curled on the ground, its skin raw

²⁹ *Life Beyond Death*, p.139.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, p.99

³² Rowling, J.K., *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, London: Bloomsbury Pub., 2004(1999), p.77.

³³ *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, p.496.

and rough, flayed-looking, and it lay shuddering under a seat where it had been left, unwanted, stuffed out of sight, struggling for breath³⁴ she hints at the worst condition people like Voldemort suffer after death and in Dumbledore's words ___ 'there is no help possible'.³⁵

Here Rowling shows her sensibility to the contemporary notions as Kenneth Ring who has been researching for more than twenty years on Near Death Experiences (NDEs) tells us that the stories of NDEs 'have, of course, now become a part of our common knowledge about what it is like to die, and, collectively, they have brought about a new and immensely consoling vision of what awaits us when we make the transition into death.'³⁶

As he tells 'these stories are nevertheless examples of incomplete or partial NDEs. That is, they take us far into the first stages of death, but they do not take us all the way.'³⁷ Harry's NDE is not like the ultimate NDE experiences that Kenneth asserts but it certainly includes many elements, like the 'encounter with a dazzling light'³⁸ as the place where Harry finds himself is full of sunlight irrespective of the fact that it was night time when Voldemort nearly killed him. Further the people who profess to have NDE believe that it changed their views about death into positive ones as tells Kenneth, 'The persons who have returned from these untimate NDE,s further assure us that this is a journey that all of us, not just a few privileged souls, will one day take.'³⁹

Finally when Rowling has Harry feel ___ 'Leaving this place would not be nearly as hard as walking into the Forest had been, but it was warm and light and peaceful here, and he knew that he was heading back to pain and the fear of more loss.'⁴⁰ ___ she makes the reader aware of the urgency to live in the present and care for those around us than indulge out of fear into the miserable chaotic search for eternal life like Voldemort. The chapter also clarifies the two prevailing attitudes to this phenomenon ___ one of dread and rejection, the other of brave acceptance. While one

³⁴ *Ibid*, p.566.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p.568.

³⁶ Ring, Kenneth, "Ultimate Near Death Experiences", *Theosophical Digest*, I Quarter 2006, p.11.

³⁷ *Ibid*.

³⁸ *Ibid*.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p.16.

⁴⁰ *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, p.579.

denotes pining for immortality, the other welcomes the inevitability of death. Immortality allures people like Voldemort and Grindelwart. Even the great and saintly figure like Dumbledore fall a prey to it though for 'the greater good'.⁴¹ But Rowling's fragile looking vulnerable hero shows not even the faintest desire to be immortal. She introduces as many as three ways to immortality to Voldemort namely, the Philosopher's Stone, the Horcruxes and the Hallows but let him possess none for long. On the other hand, Harry has his hands on all the three but waits for none to overpower his glowing heart and disposes off soonest possible. The writer, in this way emphasises that life is a greater venture before immortality. Harry wins the battle over Voldemort because unlike the latter he was selfless and never cherished the avarice of everlasting life and because he accepts bravely the truth. Rowling comes up with a brilliant definition of immortality when Dumbledore declares:

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.⁴²

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⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.573.

⁴² *Ibid*, p.577.