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# THE NEXT GREAT ADVENTURE: REPRESENTATIONS OF DEATH IN J. K. ROWLING'S *HARRY POTTER* SERIES

*LA SIGUIENTE GRAN AVENTURA:  
REPRESENTACIONES DE LA MUERTE EN LA SAGA  
HARRY POTTER, DE J. K. ROWLING*

## Abstract

In line with previous studies about the importance of breaking with taboos surrounding death in children's and YA literature, this article examines how this topic is treated in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Whereas other critical works have focused on Rowling's excessive representations of violent deaths, I concentrate on the more benign portrayals of this reality that can also be found in her novels. I contend that the series ultimately renders and treats death as a complex issue. On one hand, Rowling embraces the pedagogy of death with her explicit didactic message that death is not evil per se and has to be accepted as a natural part of our existence, an idea which is central to the series. On the other hand, this study also looks into the ways in which deviates from the pedagogy of death, arguing that this does not necessarily detract from the series' potential to promote a healthy view of this topic among readers. On the contrary, Rowling's capacity to teach her audience lessons about death while, at the same time, acknowledging that these lessons may sometimes be at odds with how readers actually feel about the end of life makes for a complex, sensitive and humane rendering of this subject.

**Keywords:** Harry Potter; J. K. Rowling; Death; Children's and YA literature; Fantasy.

## Resumen

Este artículo se propone estudiar la representación de la muerte en la saga *Harry Potter*, de J. K. Rowling, en consonancia con otros estudios previos que destacan la importancia de romper con los tabús relacionados con la muerte en la literatura infantil y juvenil. Mientras que otros ensayos críticos han destacado el exceso de muertes violentas en la obra de Rowling, el presente estudio se centra en las representaciones más benignas de la muerte que también podemos encontrar en sus novelas. Así pues, la saga trata y representa la muerte como un tema complejo. Por un lado, Rowling acoge la pedagogía de la muerte cuando, de forma explícita, transmite el mensaje didáctico, central en sus libros, de que la muerte no es necesariamente algo maligno y la debemos aceptar como una parte natural de nuestra existencia. Sin embargo, este estudio también analiza cómo la propia autora

se desvía de la pedagogía de la muerte en muchas ocasiones, sin que esto merme el potencial de sus libros para promover una visión sana del tema de la muerte entre los lectores. Al contrario, la capacidad de la autora de instruir a su público sobre la muerte y, a la vez, tener en cuenta que esas lecciones pueden entrar en conflicto con lo que los lectores sienten acerca de este tema, da como resultado una representación compleja, sensible y humana del final de la vida.

**Palabras clave:** Harry Potter; J. K. Rowling; Muerte; Literatura infantil y juvenil; Género fantástico.

## 1. Introduction

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the treatment of death in children's fiction has increasingly attracted the attention of critics, academics and pedagogues, as evinced by the growing number of publications on the subject.<sup>1</sup> In one way or another, death has always been present in Western children's literature and, even before children's literature became a separate category, "children learned about death in literature shared with adults. They heard Bible stories, fables, legends, ballads, folk tales or folk plays or read them themselves" (Butler, 1972: 105). It was mostly in the twentieth century that this topic became taboo when children were around (Moss, 1972: 530; Barsanti Vigo, 2020: 43; Corvo Sánchez, 2020: 71), although this gradual effacement of death can actually be said to have started much earlier: whereas in the seventeenth century children's books were centrally concerned with death and "help[ing] save children's souls from eternal damnation",<sup>2</sup> in nineteenth-century novels death was already represented as "an event that *may* occur during childhood, but not one that parents must teach children to expect", as is the case with Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, for instance (Gibson & Zaidman, 1991: 232, original italics). In the twentieth century, the decrease in child mortality rates, the fact that "death moved out of the home and into the hospital" (Gibson & Zaidman, 1991: 232), society's cult of beauty and youth, and modern parents' urge to overprotect children, led to death being increasingly conceived as disconnected from childhood and becoming taboo in the literature for the young. Of course, there are exceptions, such as E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952), but even then, as Butler states, "White is to be commended for facing a subject which most writers for children now avoid" (1972: 116).

Children's books start to become interested in death again in the late twentieth century. As Gibson & Zaidman observe, "ninety percent of children's books about death had post-1970 publication dates" (1991: 232). Other scholars have pointed out the arrival of New Realism in the 1970s (Clement, 2016: 12) and the emergence of the pedagogy of death, "a school of thought based on the importance of creating citizens who are able to see finality as a part of human nature" (Barsanti Vigo, 2020: 51), as factors that helped popularize children's books about death in Western cultures. Interestingly, as Vázquez García affirms, "since the second part of the twentieth century the shift in its approach has changed. It seems that the books are now used as a kind of bibliotherapy. Authors are requested to introduce the topic of death because adults think that it serves as a comforter when a loved one dies"

1 See, for example: Gibson & Zaidman, 1991; Lage Fernández & Lana Arias, 1996; James, 2009; Clement & Jamali, 2016; Oitinen & Roig Rechou, 2016; Ruzicka Kenfel & House, 2020, among many others.

2 According to Francelia Butler, the late seventeenth century was also the time in which literature for children and literature for adults became separate categories, a separation which "might have begun with the 'Warnings to apprentices'", a body of texts which Butler describes as strikingly similar "to the warnings to little children, the 'death-bed confessions' of children who disobeyed moral 'laws' and reformed too late" (1972: 104).

(2020: 157) and, I would add, when children have to come to terms with the idea that they themselves will die one day.

The year 1997 witnessed the publication of the first book of what would become one of the most prominent and influential children's literature phenomena of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—British writer J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007),<sup>3</sup> which, as the author herself admitted, features death as its central theme: "Death is an extremely important theme throughout all seven books. I would say possibly the most important theme" (*Classic New Television*, 2021 [2001]). Speaking about the death of her own mother, who was diagnosed with a fatal illness when Rowling was only an adolescent, Rowling states that:

I think I've always been, *always*, before my mother died—death, mortality has been a preoccupation of mine for a long time, as many people's preoccupation after all. It's what faces all of us. After my mother died so shockingly young—she was only forty-five—that bled into Harry at every level: the awareness of mortality, what death means, what it means to people who are left behind, what it might mean to want to never die. Um, so yeah, it informed *Harry Potter* hugely. So although I think probably I would have written the books, I don't think they would be anything like they are. The essential theme would probably be missing or be treated much less seriously. (*ABCLibrarySales*, 2017)

Aimed at older children and young adults, the seven novels in the *Harry Potter* series provide a wide range of representations of death in terms of who dies and in what way. In the Youtube video "Every Death in Harry Potter" (*MovieFlame*, 2020), they have counted an astonishing total of 104 deaths in the seven books that comprise the series. Not only are there many deaths in the novels, but death is also portrayed 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. Besides, throughout the seven books, readers not only grieve the deaths of many beloved characters, but they also accompany Harry as he faces dangerous situations that will put his life at risk and as he performs rituals that are associated with death, such as visiting his parents' graves, attending funerals, and even digging a grave with his own hands for his friend Dobby the house-elf. Death is therefore very much present in the novels in a surprising number and variety of ways.

Although death is the central theme in *Harry Potter*, there are still several aspects of Rowling's treatment of this topic that have not been explored in depth before. In their essay "Controversial Content: Is *Harry Potter* Harmful to Children?", scholars J. Taub and Servaty-Seib do devote a section to the representation of death in Rowling's books, in which the two authors affirm that "nearly all of the deaths in the Harry Potter series do occur as the result of violence/evil", an association that they regard as "potentially problematic" because:

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 mer-

3 The series is composed of seven novels: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003), *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005) and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007). Abbreviated versions of the titles will be used throughout the article.

ged 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. (2009: 23)

Certainly, throughout his young life, Harry experiences the loss of many loved ones as a consequence of violence, evil and war: his parents, his godfather Sirius Black, his owl Hedwig, his classmate Cedric Diggory, and his friends and helpers Fred Weasley, Remus Lupin and Dobby, among many other beloved characters. Even the Hogwarts ghosts, despite appearing to be humorous figures, were actually victims of violent deaths, such as beheading (Nearly Headless Nick), a basilisk attack (Moaning Myrtle) or gender violence (the Grey Lady).

Although it is true that many of the deaths in *Harry Potter* are the result of evil, it is the purpose of this article to focus on those examples in the novels in which death is not presented in a negative light and is even depicted as preferable to an undignified life, thus offering readers an alternative to the darker representations mentioned above. I argue that, although death has been present throughout the whole series, it is in the last book, *Deathly Hallows*, that Rowling's discourse on death comes full circle and the explicit didactic message that is finally conveyed to the reader is precisely what Taub and Servaty-Seib, and many other children's literature and pedagogy of death scholars, advocate: the idea that death and grief are a part of life and should be treated openly and naturally in children's and YA books. The pursuit of immortality, on the other hand, is associated with evil and embodied by the villain Lord Voldemort, whom the reader is encouraged to abhor through their identification with Harry. On the other hand, Rowling also moves away from the pedagogy of death and didacticism in certain aspects, as benign representations of death in her novels coexist with the fear, the drama and the tragedy that this human condition brings about. Finally, I examine how the metadiegetic narrative "The Tale of the Three Brothers" can be read as a celebration of the vital role that children's literature can play to help young readers come to terms with death.

## 2. Positive views of death and mortality in *Harry Potter*

The first lesson about death that Harry—and, in turn, the reader—learns in the first book is that, if there is something that magic cannot do, it is to bring back the dead. When Harry looks at himself in the Mirror of Erised, which shows you "the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts" (Rowling, 1997: 157), he sees himself reunited with his parents, who were murdered by Voldemort when he was only a baby. This scene clearly reveals that the protagonist's deepest desire is to have his dead loved ones back. The Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, however, warns him that "this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth" and that "It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live" (Rowling, 1997: 157). Harry is therefore forced to accept that life is for the living, his parents' deaths are irreversible and he must give up the hope that they might be resurrected. As Mociño González and Agrelo Costas state:

currently the authors forsake resorting to the afterlife, since it would cancel precisely the lack of solution and the internal sense of loss of the characters. Due to this, the solution becomes the maturation of the characters and the acquisition of the capability to accept and control negative feelings brought about by the situation of grief described. (2020: 102-103)

Indeed, the capacity to understand and accept death is presented in *Harry Potter* as a key feature of becoming a mature adult, and any magical object that may trick people into thinking that death can be avoided—the Mirror of Erised, the Philosopher's Stone, the Resurrection Stone or the Elder Wand, for example—is represented as potentially dangerous and undesirable.

However, Rowling does not give up the possibility of the afterlife completely in her fantasy universe, which, as she herself has admitted, is clearly influenced by Christian views:<sup>4</sup> "there clearly is a religious—undertone" (in Vieira, 2007). In *Harry Potter*, there are witches and wizards who choose to remain behind as ghosts, dead people who are immortalized in portraits and can communicate with the living, memories that are stored and can be revisited, voices that can be heard behind the mysterious veil in the Department of Mysteries and so on. In fact, Harry even gets the chance to speak to his parents on two occasions: first, in *Goblet of Fire*, when Harry's and Voldemort's wands connect, making the latter's wand regurgitate the ghosts of the last people he murdered; and second, in *Deathly Hallows*, when Harry uses the Resurrection Stone to see his dead loved ones one last time before facing Voldemort. Thus, Rowling does not negate the afterlife, and she occasionally indulges Harry's and the reader's desire for communication between the living and the dead, while also making it very clear that death is final, talking portraits are merely *memories* of dead people and becoming a ghost is not an advisable solution. In other words, Rowling does not reject the comforting belief in the afterlife that many religions—including Christianity—uphold, as long as the land of the dead and that of the living remain clearly separated.

Our life on earth is represented as finite, and any attempt in the novels to bring back the dead by magical means is either temporary or depicted in a negative light. As Nearly Headless Nick explains to Harry, he became a ghost because he was "afraid of death", and being a ghost means being "neither here nor there", "a feeble imitation of life" (Rowling, 2003: 759). Along the same lines, Dumbledore insists that "No spell can reawaken the dead" (Rowling, 2000: 756) and ghosts are only "echoes" or "shadows" (Rowling, 2000: 757). Thus, the *Harry Potter* series does not deny our longing for the afterlife, but it denies its usefulness as a *solution* to death. The only solution to death in the novels is, ultimately, acceptance. In this sense, the series aligns with the tendency that Mociño González and Agrelo Costas describe, and accepting death is presented as the wise and mature thing to do, whereas the possibility of being immortal or undead is, as we will see, associated with dark magic and monstrosity in Rowling's universe.

This connection between death, knowledge and maturity is further stressed by the figure of the Thestral, a magical creature of Rowling's own invention. Thestrals are skeletal winged horses that can be seen only by those who have seen and understood death. This seems to suggest that going through such an experience constitutes a turning point in a person's life and leaves an indelible mark—a mark of grief but also of knowledge. In other words, in the *Harry Potter* universe, those who have seen death and grasped it as a concept know things and see things that other people do not. This reflects Gibson and Zaidman's idea that, in children's books, "when a character dies, another learns a little more to live—to appreciate the gift of life even while mourning. The dying instruct the living about true priorities and the worth of each individual's life. Even understanding how to get through the emotional trauma is a valuable lesson" (1991: 233). Despite having been present when his parents

4 As Ciccio very well notes, although Rowling is a member of the Church of Scotland, she is not necessarily a Christian author of Christian books. Nonetheless, Christianity has inevitably influenced her narratives. Not only are there obvious parallels between the morals in her books and traditional Christian ones (2009: 33-34), but we can even find explicit quotations from the Bible in *Deathly Hallows* (2009: 39).

were killed, Harry only starts to see the Thestrals after witnessing the murder of his classmate Cedric Diggory in *Goblet of Fire*, suggesting that, being only a baby, Harry could not have understood what he saw when his parents were killed in front of him. Another character who can see the Thestrals is Harry's friend Luna Lovegood, who, as a little girl, witnessed the untimely accidental death of her own mother. The way in which Harry feels less alone when he meets Luna reflects the way in which readers may feel comforted by the company of Rowling's characters. After all, let us not forget that the *Harry Potter* series is aimed at older children and young adults, who are already capable of understanding death and might even have experienced the death of a relative. Thus, Rowling's narrative may provide consolation to them, not by protecting them from the knowledge of death, but by giving them characters to whom they might be able to relate, characters who, like them, can see the Thestrals.

Apart from death's irreversible nature, the idea that death is not evil per se and may even be preferable to an undignified life is also put forth in the very first book. Significantly, Harry learns this lesson in the Forbidden Forest, where—as its name suggests—Hogwarts students are not allowed to go, thus emphasizing its connection with darkness, the unknown and the taboo. When Harry first meets the centaur Firenze in this passage, the latter tells him that slaying a unicorn to drink its blood will keep you temporarily alive, but you will have to pay the price of living a cursed life. Upon hearing this, Harry answers "If you're going to be cursed for ever, death's better, isn't it?" (Rowling, 1997: 189). In this early passage, Rowling is already introducing one of the central ideas in the series, which will be further developed in subsequent books: death should not be seen as an enemy, and the failure to accept this reality can only lead to dire consequences, as exemplified by the demise of death-denying villain Lord Voldemort. This idea is stressed again by the end of the book when Dumbledore—the character through whom Rowling most often teaches that death should not be feared—explains to Harry how his friend, the alchemist Nicolas Flamel, is going to die after the destruction of the philosopher's stone, and he reassures Harry by telling him that "it really is like going to bed after a very, very long day. After all, to the well-organised mind, death is but the next great adventure" (Rowling, 1997: 215, original italics).<sup>5</sup>

After preparing her readers for what is to come with these early passages from *Philosopher's Stone*, by the end of the series Rowling actually *shows* us an example of a character who chooses to die. It is in *Half-Blood Prince* that a very important death takes place, one which is actually not the result of violence: Dumbledore's death. Although we are misled to believe that Dumbledore was murdered by traitorous Snape, it is revealed in *Deathly Hallows* that the Hogwarts Headmaster was actually already dying of a curse that "will spread, eventually, it is the sort of curse that strengthens over time" (Rowling, 2007: 546), a description that is highly reminiscent of real-life illnesses such as cancer or degenerative diseases. For this reason, Dumbledore asked Snape to kill him when the moment came, "to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation" (Rowling, 2007: 548). Dumbledore's death is therefore not murder but euthanasia. As I stated earlier, Dumbledore is the character through whom Rowling teaches most of her lessons about death, and he is presented as a moral authority in the books. The idea that death is preferable to an undignified life has been repeated by the Headmaster throughout the series, and Dumbledore's acceptance of death as the next great adventure is thus confirmed when he actually asks to be euthanized: "I prefer a quick, painless exit" (Rowling, 2003: 548).

5 This passage seems to be an intertextual allusion to J. M. Barrie's words in *Peter Pan* "Next moment he was standing erect on the rock again, with that smile on his face and a drum beating within him. It was saying, 'To die will be an awfully big adventure'" (1995 [1911]: 99).

Apart from euthanasia, Dumbledore's death can also be read as sacrifice for the greater good. Another reason why he chooses to be euthanized by Snape is to trick Voldemort into thinking that Snape is on his side and to spare Draco Malfoy, who was initially commissioned with the task of murdering him. Certainly, sacrifice plays a major role in Rowling's series. Choosing to die to save another is represented as the greatest act of love and the most powerful magic in the *Harry Potter* universe, which again shows the series's Christian undertones. As Stojilkov puts it, "Rowling's message is one of love transcending death" (2015: 146). Even if death is represented as final and irreversible in the series, this coexists in the text with the comforting message that our loved ones never truly leave us because their love lives on in ourselves. It is the sacrifice of Harry's mother Lily that protects Harry all along, and sacrifice is what finally saves the main character and the whole magical community at the end of the series. There are other characters' deaths that can also be read as sacrifice, such as Dobby's, Snape's and those of everyone who dies fighting at the Battle of Hogwarts.

By contrast, when Voldemort and Dumbledore confront each other again, the former tells the latter that "There is nothing worse than death, Dumbledore!", to which the Headmaster responds "You are quite wrong" (Rowling, 2003: 718). His incapacity to love and accept his mortality is what defines Rowling's villain Lord Voldemort, and it is represented as the root of all evil in the series. Through Rowling's attribution of sympathy and the moral authority with which she has invested Dumbledore, the reader is encouraged to reject Voldemort's point of view of human mortality as a weakness of our existence. As Klein points out:

Voldemort is obsessed with conquering death. He seeks the Sorcerer's Stone to bring himself back to power, but also to give him everlasting life. Voldemort's followers are called the Death Eaters. In an interview, J. K. Rowling tells readers that Voldemort "regards death itself as ignominious. He thinks that it's a shameful human weakness." Death and its avoidance even seem to be a part of Voldemort's name, which appears similar to French phrases that mean something like "Flight of Death" or "Flight from Death". (2012: 36)

Thus, this excessive fear of death is embodied by the series' villain,<sup>6</sup> which is a clear sign of the main lesson that Rowling wants to transmit about the need to accept our mortality. Rowling shows how Voldemort's attempts to conquer death by escaping from it through dark magic result in a process of moral decay. Similar to Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray and other gothic villains, Voldemort's appearance also deteriorates, changing from an attractive young man to a snake-faced monster, reflecting how he is gradually stripped off his humanity as he refuses to accept his mortal condition. In order to attain immortality, Voldemort chooses to break his soul into seven pieces, which he stores in different objects known as Horcruxes. Fragmenting one's soul, however, requires violently and remorselessly taking away the lives of others. As Klein puts it, the paradox is that "He gives up his humanity, [...] for a chance at an empty everlasting existence" (2012: 36). Voldemort might manage to extend his life, but at the price of leading a cursed life, which again takes us back to Firenze's warning to Harry at the beginning of the series.

6 As Klein observes, however, Voldemort is not the only character who seeks to conquer death in *Harry Potter*. Nicholas Flamel also tried to conquer death by creating the philosopher's stone, and so did Dumbledore by trying to unite the deathly hallows, which are said to turn their owner into the master of death. Yet, Klein also argues that these two characters eventually realize that trying to escape death is a mistake and therefore make a very different choice from Voldemort's (2012: 38).

The idea that death is preferable to an empty existence is further reinforced by other magical creatures of Rowling's own creation: the dementors and the inferi. The series distinguishes between the death of the soul brought about by dementors and inspired by Rowling's own experience of depression, and death as a physical reality, which *is* the natural and unavoidable destiny of all human beings. In Rowling's world, remaining alive but in pain or in a soulless body after the dementors' kiss is worse than actually dying. As the author herself has stated, her representation of depression as dark, hooded figures that suck all the happiness out of the world "was entirely conscious. And entirely from my own experience. Depression is the most unpleasant thing I have ever experienced. [...] It is that absence of being able to envisage that you will ever be cheerful again. The absence of hope" (in Treneman, 2000). The inferi, on the other hand, are zombie-like creatures—corpses that are controlled by dark magic. It is therefore the option of existing like a zombie, a ghost or an empty shell that is demonized in Rowling's novels.

Although the central message in the books is that death is a part of life and should be accepted naturally, it must be noted that Rowling does not ignore the tragedy and the shock that death causes to those who are left behind. In this sense, Rowling moves away from the pedagogy of death, which deals with this topic by "taking the drama out of it" (Corvo Sánchez, 2018: 26). Throughout the series, we see characters grieving for their dead loved ones, and the author explicitly describes Harry's reactions to the deaths of the people that he cares about. For example, when Sirius is killed, we see how Harry is not only in denial of his godfather's death, but also in a state of shock: "There was movement going on around them, pointless bustling, the flashes of more spells. To Harry it was meaningless noise, the deflected curses flying past them did not matter, nothing mattered" (Rowling, 2003: 712). In my view, omitting the tragedy and the drama could result in too aseptic a representation of death that would run the risk of alienating readers, who might not see their fears and sorrows reflected in the novels. After all, as child psychology expert Bettelheim affirms, "There is no greater threat in life than that we will be deserted, left alone. [...] and the younger we are, the more excruciating is our anxiety when we feel deserted, for the young child actually perishes when not adequately protected and taken care of" (1991 [1976]: 145). Thus, the *Harry Potter* novels admit that death is terrifying, tragic and sometimes unfair, and that it is only human to feel all these things, but even then it must be accepted.

On the other hand, fantasy elements allow for a less shocking representation of death and dead bodies which excludes the presence of gore and avoids scaring young readers unnecessarily. As Gibson and Zaidman observe, although "most psychologists and literary critics agree that ignoring death [...] is unhealthy", "[n]o one is asking for a return to the Puritan's fire and brimstone approach; nor is anyone today arguing for gruesome presentations of death" (1991: 232). In *Harry Potter*, violent deaths tend to be softened and depicted as goreless,<sup>7</sup> for they are perpetrated by means of the Killing Curse, which leaves the body intact. Physical horror is therefore often avoided, but the psychological effects of experiencing the death of a loved one are very much present and vividly depicted, as is the fear of one's own death.

7 There are some exceptions, especially in the latter (darker) books, such as Snape's brutal death at the fangs of Voldemort's snake, Nagini.



### 3. The Death of the Child and the Power of Children's Literature

Although it is fairly common for a children's story to begin with death as a plot device "to dispose of inconvenient parents' and so to allow the protagonist to mature on his or her own terms" (Hollindale and Sutherland in Clement, 2016: 12), very few children's books end in death. What is even rarer is that they end with the death of a young character, especially if this character is the protagonist, or one of the protagonists, of the story. As Doubt affirms, speaking about Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977), "It is unusual and possibly controversial to include the death of a child in a story aimed at eight-year-olds" (in Eccleshare, 2009: 601).<sup>8</sup> Even when the death of a young one is depicted, Reynolds points out that children's books tend to emphasize transcendence, not tragedy, especially when they are aimed at younger children:

Death is presented as neither traumatic nor dramatic. This lack of tragedy may associate the events with the world of child's play, reflecting the reassuring things adults often say to children when someone has died (they are out of pain, they have gone to heaven or a similarly happy place, they are not really gone because they live on in our memories). (2007: 96)

As Barsanti Vigo affirms, it is usually when readers reach the age of nine that the death of younger people starts to be introduced in children's books, and the same happens with more painful causes of death such as cancer, car accidents, war or suicide. Even then, the author argues that most children's books still tend to show the kinder and less dramatic side of death, probably to avoid causing readers too much anguish (2020: 65). After all, children's literature is often torn between instructing readers and protecting them from dangerous and disturbing knowledge.

*Harry Potter* begins with a child who already had a close encounter with death when he was a one-year-old, which earned him the epithet 'the boy who lived' in the magical community. In the last book, Harry finally learns that "His job was to walk calmly into Death's welcoming arms" (Rowling, 2007: 554). As its title suggests, *Deathly Hallows* is centrally concerned with death, which is also made evident from the beginning by Aeschylus's and William Penn's epigraphs in its opening pages. It is in this novel that all the allusions to death from the previous books finally acquire a special significance when we realize that Rowling has been preparing her young hero and the readers for this final act. Since a part of Voldemort's soul resides in Harry, the only way to eradicate his enemy and liberate the magical world is to let himself be killed. After all the lessons about death that he has learned throughout the series, Harry accepts this fate and chooses to sacrifice himself for his people, a deed for which he has been compared to Jesus Christ (Ciaccio, 2009; Murphy, 2011) and which carries undertones of the Christian culture of death "as the moment in which the soul is finally granted freedom" (Ciaccio, 2009: 39).

When Harry accepts to sacrifice himself, his love saves his people, as he tells Voldemort: "I was ready to die to stop you hurting these people – [...] I've done what my mother did. They're protected from you" (Rowling, 2007: 591). And by precipitating Voldemort's self-destruction, Harry frees the world from the unjust and unnecessary deaths that result from war, violence and hatred. Another textual element that points at the centrality of death in this novel is the presence of a metadiegetic

<sup>8</sup> *Bridge to Terabithia* ends with the death of the protagonist's best friend, Leslie, a fifth-grade girl. The novel has often been the subject of controversy, especially in the United States, due to its potentially disturbing themes, death being one of them (Bryson, n.d.).

narrative whose main subject is death: "The Tale of the Three Brothers" by the fictional storyteller Beedle the Bard.<sup>9</sup> As Yung-Hsing Wu observes, "most fans agreed that the Tales represented an extension of the lessons about friendship, self-reliance, and perseverance the novels teach and, therefore, offered another opportunity to foster that moral education through reading" (in Gruner, 2019: 179). I suggest that this can also be applied to Rowling's lessons about death, which are reinforced by this metadiegetic narrative. This fairy tale for witches and wizards tells the legend of three brothers who sought to cheat and escape death to no avail by means of three magical objects known as the deathly hallows: the Elder Wand, the Resurrection Stone and the Invisibility Cloak. With this story, Rowling emphasizes the futility of the human attempt to avoid death, and the message that the tale articulates is that life must be lived to the fullest so that, when death comes, it will not be so hard to accept. This is exemplified by the third brother in the tale, who escaped death for years with his Invisibility Cloak, and when his time came, "*he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, equals, they departed this life*" (Rowling, 2007: 332, original italics). Since Harry possesses an Invisibility Cloak, which is later revealed to be one of the deathly hallows, the text immediately establishes identification between Harry and the third brother, the one that accepted his mortal condition. It is also quite significant that this tale arrives at the hands of Harry and his friends through Dumbledore, who bequeaths the book of fairy tales to Hermione after his death. Even when he is already dead, Dumbledore is still posthumously teaching the main characters and the readers about the importance of accepting death.

Although some explicit didacticism about death is present throughout the seven novels, for the most part Rowling keeps the reader's attention focused on Harry's adventures. Speaking about William Goldman's *The Princess Bride*, Corvo Sánchez remarks how the author "brilliantly moves the readers' attention to the adventure and they unconsciously absorb all the words related to death as part of the adventures that the characters live" (2018: 36). Thus, "[readers] understand, in an almost subconscious way, that deaths and death threats are a part of the plot of the story" (Corvo Sánchez, 2018: 36) and, I would add, a part of life. This strategy, I argue, is also very much present in Rowling's novels, which allow the reader to infer the idea that death is a part of life from the events that take place. Yet, it is in *Deathly Hallows*, that Rowling resorts to explicit didacticism by means of "The Tale of the Three Brothers", clearly pointing at the moral lesson about death that she wants her readers to take away from her books.

Besides reinforcing the series' central lesson about death, this example of metafiction also plays a crucial role in highlighting the importance of children's literature as a means to help young people deal with, not only the deaths of others, but also the possibility of their own death. In a previous publication, I examined how:

This intradiegetic storyteller does much more than just reinforce one of the main moral lessons in the series, the fact that attempting to escape death ultimately leads to self-destruction. Beedle's tale also provides a commentary on narrative and, specifically, on narratives aimed at young readers. [...] I read this as an affirmation of the potential of fictional stories—and particularly children's stories, folklore and fairy tales—to transmit knowledge without necessarily claiming to hold the absolute truth as other types of narratives masquerading as history or fact do. (Llompарт Pons, 2019: 136-137)

9 This fairy tale is included in the metafictional collection *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, which was later published as a companion to the series in 2008.

Thus, what seemed to be a mere "children's tale, told to amuse rather than instruct" (Rowling, 2007: 333) ends up being key to the series's denouement and highly enlightening for the young protagonists. Given the tale's obvious didactic and moralistic nature (Gruner, 2019: 179), Rowling, perhaps deliberately, highlights the importance of giving young people stories about death: just like Dumbledore gives "The Tale of the Three Brothers" to Harry, Ron and Hermione, we adult teachers, parents, writers and scholars should also make stories about death available to young readers. This illustrates precisely the idea held by most scholars of children's literature that death must be present in fiction for the young, as well as Taub and Servaty-Seib's claim that death is not dark or evil per se and should not always be depicted as such. In the *Harry Potter* world, death may be perceived as evil, as it is by Voldemort, or it may be a friend, as it is for the third brother in the tale, for Dumbledore and, eventually, for Harry.

This view of death as a friend may be said to align "The Tale of the Three Brothers", and *Harry Potter* in general, with the pedagogy of death, which "deal[s] with this topic from a realistic point of view, showing in general a gentle approach to the subject and a friendly message about the end of life" (Corvo Sánchez, 2018: 26). Nevertheless, the tale's moral about death is complicated in Rowling's actual novels, which offer a more nuanced approach and often end up rejecting this didacticism.

For example, the series distances itself from the more gentle portrayals of the pedagogy of death by placing emphasis on the terror that dying provokes to Harry: "Terror washed over him as he lay on the floor, with that funeral drum pounding inside him. Would it hurt to die?" (Rowling, 2007: 554).<sup>10</sup> Just as Rowling does not omit the tragedy and the shock that the death of a loved one causes, she does not deny the fear of dying either, in a recognition that being brave and accepting death does not imply the absence of fear. In this sense, the series takes quite an honest stance: death may be a natural part of life, but fear of death is also a human and natural emotion. As Stojilkov puts it, "The fear of death is probably the ultimate emotion human beings can experience. Every 'little fear'—of heights, water, or broken heart—essentially is the subliminal fear of one's life ending" (2015: 137). Thus, it may be argued that representing death as a purely benign and natural force in children's fiction could be disingenuous to readers and might invalidate their fears and traumas to favor an overly rational and detached discourse. As Cole already noted in her 1971 article, many books for children on death:

Try to diffuse the finality and fearfulness by presenting death as just another natural process. But to most adults in our culture, death is more than just a natural process. It is an occasion surrounded with mystery and deep emotions. Presenting it to a child as just another change we go through is less than candid. (in Butler, 1972: 112)

Instead, what we find in *Harry Potter* is an acknowledgment that fearing death is human, but this fear must eventually be faced and conquered and should not take over our lives.

Furthermore, despite her insistence on accepting death, it must be pointed out that Rowling eventually introduces a plot twist that allows for Harry to escape death and the series to end happily. Since, throughout the seven novels, Rowling has insisted that no magic can revive the dead, the reader is led to believe that the series will indeed end with the death of Harry Potter when we read that "He

<sup>10</sup> This passage seems to echo J. M. Barrie's passage again about Peter Pan "with that smile on his face and a drum beating within him" (Barrie, 1995 [1911]: 99).

saw the [Voldemort's] mouth move and a flash of green light, and everything was gone" (Rowling, 2007: 564). Yet, as Stojilkov affirms, "The popular culture storylines [...] dictate that the hero of the story should not die" (2015: 139). Indeed, the reader's grief for Harry does not last long, as we soon learn that Harry is not really dead for he is still protected by his mother's sacrifice. Instead, Harry finds himself in what seems to be "some kind of afterlife" or limbo (Stojilkov, 2015: 141), where he is met by Dumbledore, who tells him that he can make the choice to go back to the land of the living if he wishes to. Harry therefore comes back to life—another aspect for which he has been compared to Jesus Christ (Murphy, 2011)—after his near-death experience, a rebirth that can also be read in metaphorical terms: after his acceptance of death, the young boy in Harry 'dies', and he is reborn as an adult.

It may be argued that this ending contradicts Rowling's main didactic message about death. The author claims that death has to be accepted but, at the end of the day, she does not dare to let her hero die, thus aligning with a tradition of presenting death to children which "implies the harbouring of false hopes, such as another life, an alternative dimension where all evils are redressed, or even the characters' return to life" (Lorenzo García and Pereira Rodríguez, 2020: 202). We have already seen how Rowling does not deny the existence of the afterlife in her fictional universe and is prone to have more realistic approaches to death coexist—and sometimes come into conflict—with idealistic representations. In the case of Harry's death, she eventually resorts to the return to life in what some critics have described as a clichéd happy ending. Stojilkov, for example, states that:

Before the complete *Harry Potter* series was published, Rowling was rather mysterious regarding whether her title character would make it to the end of the seventh novel. Eventually, it turned out that the readers need not have had doubts whether their loving hero would survive, since Rowling did not step out of the accepted cliché that requires the hero to achieve victory safe and sound. (2015: 140)

In my view, Rowling's choice to let Harry live in the end does not necessarily negate the explicit didactic message that she seeks to transmit to her readers about death. After all, what matters is not that Harry eventually escapes death but the fact that he did not try to. As Dumbledore tells him, "You are the true master of death, because the true master does not seek to run away from Death" (Rowling, 2007: 577).

What is more, I believe that the happy ending is necessary to reach younger audiences and help them come to terms with the concept of death.

As Lorenzo García & Pereira Rodríguez affirm:

In the same way that adults believe in resurrection (Christianity) or reincarnation (Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism), children are taught to believe in the resurrection of characters that have been specifically created for them (either in their original shape or diversely metamorphosed) with the intention of dampening the harrowing desolation and emptiness that is left behind death. (2020: 202)

Along the same lines, Rodríguez Rodríguez and Álvarez Raposeiras point out that "[children's products] usually include some positive and optimistic features, which bring hope and light to the sadness and darkness of the topic" (2020: 161). Indeed, hope, recovery, escape and consolation

(Tolkien, 2008 [1947]) have been staples of children's literature for a very long time, and an overly tragic ending could end up alienating readers. Furthermore, Harry's happy ending does not negate the possibility of people dying at a very young age. It should be noted that, although Harry is brought back to life, there are many other characters, young and old, that die in the Battle of Hogwarts and whose deaths are final. Rowling therefore explores the death of young people, but she chooses to do so through secondary characters while allowing her young protagonist to live. On the other hand, as Tolkien observes, the story that ends happily "does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance" (2008: 75, original italics). Certainly, the joy of the ending in *Harry Potter* is possible precisely because of how likely it was for the story to end badly. Before the relief of the happy ending, Rowling has shown us Harry's death; she has shown us the child protagonist realizing that he is going to die, and she has made us feel his terror for one whole chapter.

#### 4. Conclusions

In her 1972 article, Butler asks the question "How is it best to introduce a child through literature to the idea of death?", to which her answer is "the honest and warm human approach is best—not talking down to the child because of his age, for death knows all ages, but simply telling him what we know, what we don't know, what we fear and what we hope" (1972: 120). I see much of this approach to death in Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. In the present essay, we have seen how the importance of accepting death as a natural process is at the very heart of the novels, while at the same time Rowling implicitly admits that this didactic message may not be enough, for it may come into conflict with our fears, hopes and other emotions regarding death. The pedagogy of death is therefore present in *Harry Potter*, but it is only one aspect of Rowling's treatment of this theme. Coming from an author who experienced the fatal illness of a loved one when she was young, this is hardly surprising, as Rowling is probably very much aware that death means more to us than the natural end to life. What Rowling offers in *Harry Potter* is a complex discourse that urges readers to come to terms with and accept our mortality, while making it very clear that this is not incompatible with feeling that death is sometimes tragic, unfair and evil.

It may even be argued that the presence of violent deaths in the series should not be seen in a negative light, even if it may reinforce and perpetuate Western conceptions of death as an evil force. After all, young *Harry Potter* readers may have seen—and might even have experienced—wars, terrorist attacks and school shootings on television and the Internet. They know that, in far too many parts of the world, children and adults die unfairly as a consequence of violence, and I do not believe that this reality should be censored or avoided in children's literature. The presence of 'evil' deaths can coexist in children's texts with a more benign view of death, in an acknowledgment that both realities are equally true.

That being said, the idea that death must be accepted naturally as a part of life is undeniably at the heart of *Harry Potter* and should be at the heart of children's literature in general, not only because it is the inevitable end that awaits all living beings, but also because, without death, life itself is meaningless. As Klein very well points out, "Without the possibility of death, it doesn't matter what you do; nothing can ultimately affect you one way or the other" (2012: 36). In other words, the absence of death renders the existence of love and moral values useless. As Klein adds, "It is this recognition that we do not have an eternity which gives meaning and urgency to the things

we do. Every decision matters; every decision has consequences that affect ourselves and others. We recognize that we have to act, but moreover, that we have to act with care and thought" (2012: 37). Besides, "Our mortality gives us a reason to love. [...] The recognition of our own demise gives us powerful reasons to make and experience these exalting connections while we can" (Klein, 2012: 39). Thus, children's literature itself, being a body of texts that is concerned with transmitting values and life lessons to the younger generations, also loses all its significance if we pretend that death cannot affect children and their surroundings.

The acceptance of death is ultimately aligned in the *Harry Potter* novels with maturity and knowledge, showing that positive things can emerge from death, darkness and despair. Death is also rebirth and renewal, as we see when Harry returns from the dead, transformed into a mature, renewed and stronger human being. As Rowling tells us through Dumbledore's words, "Understanding is the first step to acceptance, and only with acceptance can there be recovery" (Rowling, 2000: 736). After all, let us not forget that it is the author's experience, knowledge and understanding of death that has made the *Harry Potter* books what they are.

It is certainly true that Rowling does not break with some taboo and stereotypical aspects of death, such as false hopes in the afterlife, the happy ending and the belief in the possibility of resurrection. Yet, maybe this is precisely what makes the *Harry Potter* novels so successful among both young and adult readers: the coexistence of the conservative and the subversive in the texts; the compromise they reach between appealing to and indulging readers' fears and desires, on one hand, and teaching them that these desires and fears must be controlled, on the other; and their capacity to temporarily disturb the reader only to bring them back to the safety and the consolation of the happy ending, presumably with lessons learned.

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