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TOLKIEN'S GREAT ESCAPE AND ITS ROLE IN THE HARRY POTTER SERIES: HOW THE CONCEPT OF DEATH SHAPES J.K. ROWLING'S NOVELS

Abstract

The main aim of this article is to discuss Tolkien's definition of escapism and his concept of the Great Escape with particular reference to its presence in the Harry Potter saga. The article will focus on the theme of death in J. K. Rowling's books and diverse attitudes of characters, such as Lord Voldemort, Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter, towards death. By doing so it will present how closely fantasy is related with the 'real world' and how death and its perception can shape the core of a story. Additionally, the article will show the relationship between religion and the understanding of death and discuss religious influences Tolkien's and Rowling's narratives.

Key words: J.R.R. Rowling, J.R.R. Tolkien, Great Escape, death, Harry Potter

Fantasy literature, with its long and eventful history, has received both harsh criticism and high praise. It has been perceived by some as "childish" or "unworthy reading,"¹ or as a magnificent example of the writer's creativity.

¹ In his classic essay *On Fairy Stories*, Tolkien comments: "It is parents and guardians who have classified fairy stories as Juvenilia. And this is a small sample of the falsification of values that results." J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories, Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947, p. 15.

However, it is undeniable that fantasy has been growing in popularity for a long time, especially due to such prominent authors as J. R. R. Tolkien, Ursula Le Guin, J. K. Rowling, George R. R. Martin or Stephen King. Often criticized for its detachment from the real world and lack of didactic values, fantasy is sometimes excluded from academic research. With its stories of distant lands, magical creatures and supernatural powers, it has been considered as a means of escapism. Escapist literature, as it is sometimes called, has also been a subject of criticism. In his essay *Escapism in Literature* Olaf Stapledon comments on its function in a following way: "the main import of ... [escapist literature] is to protect the mind from unpleasant reality."² Such a view was opposed by many, for instance Tolkien, who in his essay *On Fairy Stories* claims:

On what the misusers are fond of calling Real Life, Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic. In real life it is difficult to blame it, unless it fails; in criticism it would seem to be the worse the better it succeeds. Evidently we are faced by a misuse of words, and also by a confusion of thought. Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home?³

Relying on the immersion of the reader in an imaginary world, fantasy seems to fulfill this escapist function perfectly. However, despite its detachment from the real world, fantasy often deals with typical human experiences, such as adventure, heroism, love, fear, and coming of age. While adventure and growing mature are major themes in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, they also occur and drive the plot in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series.

Tolkien also pondered about escape in a different sense, namely, conceptualizing the Great Escape in terms of the escape from death: "And lastly there is the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death. Fairy-stories provide many examples and modes of this – which might be called the genuine escapist, or (I would say) fugitive spirit."⁴ As the novelist himself admits, death and immortality are the main themes of *The Lord of the Rings*: "it is only in reading the work myself ... that I become aware of the dominance of the theme of Death."⁵ Tolkien also claims that a false sense of immortality is given

² O. Stapledon, *Essays and Talks*, in: *An Olaf Stapledon Reader*, ed. Robert Crossley, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997, p. 193.

³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy Stories*, p. 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters*, in: *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind "Lord of The Rings"*, eds. P. Kreeft, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005, p. 131.

by the Ring, as any person who uses it “*fades*: he becomes in the end invisible permanently, and walks in the twilight under the eye of the Dark Power that rules the Rings,”⁶ and “Dark Power will sooner or later devour him.”⁷ Therefore, the story that seems to be predominantly about the adventures of an imaginary creature – the Hobbit – transforms into a narrative in which death plays the main role.

What is more, both J.R.R. Tolkien’s and J.K. Rowling’s novels suggest that there are indeed some forms of afterlife present in their fictional worlds and that they might be somehow related to religious systems and beliefs. One of the most distinctive features of religions across the world is that they all deal with the idea of afterlife, proposing diverse visions of it. In their article *Religiosity and Fear of Death: A Theory-Oriented Review of the Empirical Literature*, Lee Ellis and Eshah A. Wahab claim that human concern about death and the after-world has actually been a fundament of religions and religiosity:

Several writers have proposed that at least by the time they reach adulthood all humans will have consciously confronted the reality of personal death, and that such contemplation has given rise to religions throughout the world (Becker 1973; Feifel 1974; Spilka et al. 1977). Jung (1969, p. 408) went so far as to identify religions as tantamount to “complicated systems of preparing for death”.⁸

Since the issue of interrelation between death, religions and immortality is important to the analysis of the works by J.R.R. Tolkien and J.K. Rowling, it is going to be discussed herein.

It is essential to note that religious systems per se are not to be found in Tolkien’s or Rowling’s works. However, some core ideas of particular religions appear to have been incorporated by those authors, and as such will be addressed in this article. Interestingly enough, Tolkien expressed his view on the presence of religion in *The Lord of the Rings* in the following way:

The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like “religion”, to cults or practices,

⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, New York: Harper Collins, 1994, p. 61.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁸ L. Ellis, and E.A. Wahab, *Religiosity and Fear of Death: A Theory-Oriented Review of the Empirical Literature*, “Review of Religious Research” 2012, no. 1, p. 5.

in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.⁹

Although Tolkien's concern with death, immortality and afterlife is relevant to the discussion of the Ring, Gollum and Sauron, it is even more evident in the case of elves and their culture. He writes: "The Eldar do indeed grow older, even if slowly: the limit of their lives is the life of Arda, which though long beyond the reckoning of Men is not endless, and ages also."¹⁰ Therefore, it can be concluded that elves do die, even though they live longer than any other race. Tolkien continues:

Now the Eldar are immortal within *Arda* according to their right nature. But if a *feä* (spirit) indwells in and coheres with a *hroä* [bodily form] that is not of its own choice but ordained, and is made of the flesh or substance of *Arda* itself, then the fortune of this union must be vulnerable by the evils that do hurt to *Arda*. ... If then the *hroä* be destroyed, or so hurt that it ceases to have health, sooner or later it 'dies'. That is: it becomes painful for the *feä* to dwell in it, being neither a help to life and will nor a delight to use, so that the *feä* departs from it, and its function being at an end its coherence is unloosed, and it returns again to the general [body] of *Arda*. Then the *feä* is, as it were, houseless, and it becomes invisible to bodily eyes (though clearly perceptible by direct awareness to other *feär*).¹¹

Tolkien also states that elves can be reborn, which is evident in the way their souls receive new bodies:

A houseless *feä* that chose or was permitted to return to life re-entered the incarnate world through child-birth. Only thus could it return. For it is plain that the provision of a bodily house for a *feä*, and the union of *feä* with *hroä*, was committed by Eru to the Children, to be achieved in the act of begetting.¹²

Although Tolkien states that *The Lord of the Rings* is "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work", the entire concept of spirits and rebirth might conjure up associations with Eastern religions, namely Buddhism and Hinduism, in

⁹ H. Carpenter, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Ch. Tolkien, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000, p. 191.

¹⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, *History of Middle-earth*, Vol. 10, ed. Christopher Tolkien, London: Allen & Unwin, 1983, p. 56.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

which the theme of reincarnation plays a crucial role. Tolkien is also clear about the form the reborn elves would have: “They were given the choice to remain houseless, or (if they wished) to be re-housed in the same form and shape as they had had.”¹³ However, not every elf has a desire to come back to life again: “Some *feär* in grief or weariness gave up hope, and turning away from life relinquished their bodies, even though these might have been healed or were indeed unhurt. Few of these latter desired to be re-born, not at least until they had been long in ‘waiting’; some never returned.”¹⁴ Interestingly enough, there is an example of an elf who, having been traumatized, lost her will to live in the Middle Earth any longer:

In 2509 Celebrían wife of Elrond was journeying to Lórien when she was waylaid in the Redhorn Pass, and her escort being scattered by the sudden assault of the Orcs, she was seized and carried off. She was pursued and rescued by Elladan and Elrohir, but not before she had suffered torment and had received a poisoned wound. She was brought back to Imladris, and though healed in body by Elrond, lost all delight in Middle-earth, and the next year went to the Havens and passed over Sea.¹⁵

As it can be inferred from this excerpt, the prospect of remaining “in this world,” even though among the living beloved ones, relatives and fellows, may prove to be unbearable to the traumatized who would sooner give up on it than continue life in pain.

A similar theme is presented in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, when Harry asks the Headless Nick if Sirius could come back as a ghost:

Nick turned away from the window and looked mournfully at Harry. “He won’t come back.”

“Who?”

“Sirius Black,” said Nick.

“But you did!” said Harry angrily. “You came back — you’re dead and you didn’t disappear —”

“Wizards can leave an imprint of themselves upon the earth, to walk palely where their living selves once trod,” said Nick miserably. “But very few wizards choose that path.”

“Why not?” said Harry. ...

He will not come back,” repeated Nick quietly. “He will have ... gone on.”

¹³ Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Return of the King Appendix A*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1955, p. 10.

"What d'you mean, 'gone on'?" said Harry quickly. "Gone on where? Listen — what happens when you die, anyway? Where do you go? Why doesn't everyone come back? Why isn't this place full of ghosts? Why — ?"

"I cannot answer," said Nick.

"You're dead, aren't you?" said Harry exasperatedly. "Who can answer better than you?"

"I was afraid of death," said Nick. "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..." He gave a small sad chuckle. "I know nothing of the secrets of death, Harry, for I chose my feeble imitation of life instead."¹⁶

The abovementioned fragment, along with other elements, for example the story of the Deathly Hallows and the Resurrection Stone, suggests that there is some form of afterlife in Harry Potter's world. In fact, if we scratch beneath the surface, the story of Harry Potter is to a great extent a story about death and immortality, that is the Great Escape in Tolkien's understanding. Firstly, the death of Harry's parents shapes his life. Secondly, death, as something which must be avoided at all cost, frames the entire story. The author of the Harry Potter series, J. K. Rowling herself, acknowledges it in one of the interviews:

Definitely Mom dying had a profound influence on the books. ... The theme of how we react to death, how much we fear it. Of course, I think which is a key part of the book because Voldemort is someone who will do anything not to die. He's terrified of death. And in many ways, all of my characters are defined by their attitude to death and the possibility of death.¹⁷

With regard to the attitudes to death depicted in the novels, it is worth considering three main characters: Lord Voldemort, Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore. Young Voldemort's attitude towards death is best expressed in the following statement: "My mother can't have been magic, or she wouldn't have died"¹⁸. For him dying is clearly something shameful and inappropriate for a gifted magician. As the story develops, especially in *The Goblet of Fire* and

¹⁶ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012, p. 861.

¹⁷ M. Vieira, Meredith, *Harry Potter: The Final Chapter*, Interview with J. K. Rowling, NBC News, 20.07.2007, <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/20001720/ns/dateline_nbc-harry_potter/harry-potter-final-chapter/#.W9x56bWZ1Pa> [01.11.2018].

¹⁸ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013, p. 275.

The Half-Blood Prince, the readers realize what the fear of and determination to avoid death can lead to. Voldemort's career involves considerable achievements: great education and best marks, an opportunity to work in the Ministry of Magic, along with the development of truly powerful magical skills. These achievements could be perceived remarkable but for the fact that they were driven by a wicked desire to avoid death and become immortal. This longing finally led Voldemort to the greatest imaginable evil – murder, an act necessary to create *horcruxes*, which were meant to give him immortality. Voldemort's moral degradation is the clearest example of how perilous fear might be, especially if one's philosophy is that "the end justifies the means." Those means, of course, were indescribably cruel and included torturing and killing many innocent beings, as well as oppressing others and forcing them to unquestionable obedience. Similarly to *The Lord of the Rings*, where Sauron's evil powers were hidden in the Ring, parts of Voldemort's maimed soul were encased in symbolical objects, making them most dangerous and jeopardizing those who were in their possession.

There are other hints which show that the Ring and *horcruxes* are somewhat related. Firstly, in order to obtain the Ring, Gollum (Smeagol back then) committed an atrocity – he killed his friend, Deagol, who had found it first: "2463. The White Council is formed. About this time Déagol the Stoor finds the One Ring, and is murdered by Sméagol."¹⁹ Voldemort had to murder a person every time he wished to create *horcruxes* and secure his immortality. At the age of sixteen, he arranged his first prey, a colleague Moaning Myrtle, to be killed by a basilisk, which was under Voldemort's direct control. Secondly, Tolkien's Ring could prolong the life of its owner but also blemished him and negatively affected his mind. Likewise, the creation of *horcruxes* that required ripping apart the soul blemished Voldemort, making him nearly inhuman. His strive for immortality became so obsessive that he "had pushed his soul to the limit."²⁰ It is significant that the *horcruxes* were created from the items Voldemort particularly treasured, including Hogwarts founders' artifacts. They were to be symbols of his power and importance, especially the Slytherin's Locket, which constituted a proof that Voldemort was indeed the Salazar Slytherin's proud heir.²¹ This seems to correspond to the way Gollum treasured the Ring, calling it

¹⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings, Appendix A*, 1955, p. 51.

²⁰ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014, p. 185.

²¹ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, p. 196.

“my precious” every time he spoke of it. By collecting Hogwarts founders’ artifacts, Lord Voldemort satisfied a pure human desire to stress his own importance, in that case the lineage of Salazar Slytherin. Moreover, by hiding parts of his soul in those objects, he expressed a belief that the items can be relied upon in the matter of his own life and its protection. The parallel between Gollum’s Ring and the *horcruxes* of Voldemort lies in the fact that although Gollum did not covet the Ring for the sheer possibility of having his life prolonged, it maimed him the way the *horcruxes* maimed Voldemort. Consequently, his attachment to it proved to be lethal for him, exactly as it was in the case of Voldemort. However, there is an important difference: he did not “covet” *horcruxes* to the very end, but rather throughout most of his life; in the end, he believed another artifact would prove effective, namely, the elder wand.

The perception of death in the Harry Potter saga is diverse. Some characters, as Voldemort, fear it. The effort he takes to protect himself is unprecedented in the story. In fact, his name translated into French means “flight from death” or “theft from death,” and, as Kerrie Anne Le Lievre claims, “encapsulates not only his worldview but also his narrative.”²² For others, on the other hand, death is a great mystery, or even an adventure, as Dumbledore perfectly puts it into words: “To one as young as you, I’m sure it seems incredible, but to Nicholas and Perenelle, it really is like going to bed after a very, very long day. After all, to the very well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure.”²³ The scene evokes connotations with the farewell of Frodo Baggins that takes place in *Return of the King*, when he is about to sail to Valinor:

And the ship went out into the High Sea and passed on into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise²⁴.

Although the fragment does not literally refer to dying, the image of white shores and green country as a metaphor of death has been later popularized in popular culture by P. Jackson in his movie adaptation of *Lord of the Rings*. The

²² K. A. Le Lievre, *Wizards and Wainescots: Generic Structures and Genre Themes in the Harry Potter Series*, “Mythlore” 2003, no. 1, pp. 25-36.

²³ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007, p. 240.

²⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, 1994, p. 176.

context is slightly different here – in the *Return of the King*, Gandalf refers to the “white shores” when he talks about death with Pippin during the siege of Minas Tirith:

Pippin: I didn't think it would end this way.

Gandalf: End? No, the journey doesn't end here. Death is just another path, one that we all must take. The grey rain-curtain of this world rolls back, and all turns to silver glass, and then you see it.

Pippin: What? Gandalf? See what?

Gandalf: White shores, and beyond, a far green country under a swift sunrise.

Pippin: Well, that isn't so bad.

Gandalf: No. No, it isn't.²⁵

According to Tolkien's notion of the Great Escape, the aforementioned quotations are not entirely escapist in a negative way, but present death as something completely natural. The phrases used by Dumbledore (“next great adventure”) and Gandalf (“white shores, and beyond, a far green country under a swift sunrise”) make it appear beautiful and exciting. Both Dumbledore and Gandalf express the point of view of people who are very mature and reconciled to the idea that death is not to be avoided.

An example of how after-death journey might be understood is depicted in *the Deadly Hallows*, when Dumbledore explains to Harry:

– “But I should have died – I didn't defend myself! I meant to let him kill me!”

– “And that,” said Dumbledore, “will, I think, have made all the difference.” ...

– “We are in King's Cross, you say? I think that if you decided not to go back, you would be able to...let's say...board a train.”

– “And where would it take me?”

– “On.”²⁶

As if to reinforce the perception of death as an adventure, Dumbledore says that Harry has a choice, he does not have to continue his struggle with Voldemort. The meaning of this scene is not to be underestimated, as it explicitly shows that there is an afterworld in the Harry Potter series, where humans can remain in their bodily form, although appearing as somewhat more “pure”:

²⁵ *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, directed by Peter Jackson, 2003.

²⁶ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, pp.708-709.

“His [Harry’s] body appeared unscathed. He touched his face. He was not wearing glasses anymore.”²⁷ The same refers to Dumbledore: “He [Dumbledore] spread his arms wide, and his hands were both whole and white and undamaged.”²⁸ Moreover, the setting of the scene at the King’s Cross station is vividly described:

He lay in a bright mist, though it was not like mist he had ever experienced before. His surroundings were not hidden by cloudy vapor; rather the cloudy vapor had not yet formed into surroundings. ... The longer he looked, the more there was to see. A great domed glass roof glittered high above him in sunlight. Perhaps it was a palace.²⁹

This depiction seems as peaceful and idyllic as Gandalf’s observations about “white shores and green country under a swift sunrise”. What is more, both Tolkien and Rowling employ the motif of death as a journey. While elves and hobbits could travel (presumably sail) from the Havens over the sea, Harry Potter could (whether only metaphorically or not) “board a train”.

The metaphor of a journey is a powerful cue confirming the existence of afterlife in the Harry Potter universe, which invites one to discuss the theme of death and the fear of it in the context of religious beliefs. The connection between death, fear and religions seems to be the essence of buffering theory discussed by Lee Ellis and Eshah A. Wahab in their article *Religiosity and Fear of Death*. This theory “asserts that religions have developed sets of premises and deductions to help alleviate fear of death for their followers.”³⁰ According to other researchers “believing in the prospects of an afterlife alleviates the fear of death by assuring believers that death is not the end of one’s conscious experiences”³¹ but rather “a portal to immortality.”³² As it has been mentioned before, although religions in the strict sense are present neither in Tolkien’s works nor in Rowling’s novels, the aforementioned diverse forms of afterlife and immortality appear to be related to them. All the so called “Abrahamic religions,” such

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 705-706.

²⁸ Ibid., p.707.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 705-706.

³⁰ L. Ellis, E.A. Wahab, *Religiosity and Fear of Death*, p. 5.

³¹ B. M. Rose, and M. O’Sullivan, *Afterlife, Beliefs and Death Anxiety: An Exploration of the Relationship between Afterlife Expectations and Fear of Death in an Undergraduate Population*, “Omega: Journal of Death and Dying” 2002, no. 45, pp. 229–243.

³² P. Wink, J. Scott, *Does Religiousness Buffer against the Fear of Death and Dying in Late Adulthood? Findings from a Longitudinal Study*, “Journal of Gerontology” 2005, no. 60B, pp. 207–214.

as Judaism, Christianity and Islam incorporate beliefs of afterlife, which, in fact, are the core tenets of the two latter ones.³³ Therein afterlife (seemingly in a bodily form) is seen as the most desired outcome. On the other hand, the Eastern religions, for instance Buddhism and Hinduism, include the beliefs in a “cycle of death and rebirth” (*samsara*),³⁴ for example in the form of reincarnation. In fact, reincarnation, which can be seen as a form of rebirth, has a different status than the concept of immortality in Christianity. In the Eastern religions earthly existence is seen as full of pain and suffering, which can only be alleviated by “freeing (or releasing) oneself from a cycle of rebirth.”³⁵ Buddhism and Hinduism both share the concept known as Moksha, or more widely as Nirvana,³⁶ which involves liberating oneself from the aforementioned cycle and is thought of as the ultimate goal of life. Contrary to the western approach to death, in the Eastern religions death “is deemed insignificant with respect to the cosmic self.”³⁷

A considerable amount of research has been conducted to investigate beliefs in afterlife among different cultures. In the essay *Immortality of the Soul as an Intuitive Idea: Towards a Psychological Explanation of the Origins of Afterlife Beliefs*, the authors state:

Beliefs in afterlife are a recurrent and prevalent characteristic of Human Culture, since they seem to be an essential element of religious thought in all known human cultures (Morin, 1970; Thomas, 1976; Obayashi, 1992). Birket-Smith (1955) ventured that the only cultures that do not show afterlife beliefs are those in which those beliefs were not researched. This inter-cultural recurrence and prevalence over time may be a sign that humans have an intuitive tendency to understand death as the continuity of existence.³⁸

This can apparently be associated with the previously quoted passages attributed to Dumbledore and Gandalf respectively: “After all, to the very well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure”³⁹ and “Death is just an-

³³ A. Sharma, *Our Religions: The Seven World Religions Introduced by Preeminent Scholars from Each Tradition*, New York: Harper Collins, 1994, p. 10.

³⁴ W. D. O’Flaherty, *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980, p. 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁷ M. Dhavamony, *Hindu Spirituality*, Gregorian & Biblical Press, 1999, p. 1.

³⁸ V. Pereira, L. Faisca, and R. de Sa-Saraiva, *Immortality of the Soul as an Intuitive Idea: Towards a Psychological Explanation of the Origins of Afterlife Beliefs*, “Journal of Cognition and Culture” 2012, no. 12, pp. 101–103.

³⁹ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007, p. 243.

other path, one that we all must take.”⁴⁰ Similarly to Buddhism and Hinduism, both of them suggest that death is nothing to be scared of. In the essay *Sacred Armor: Religion's Role as a Buffer Against the Anxieties of Life and the Fear of Death* the researchers conclude:

We believe that religiousness continues to thrive and serve humans well because a central function, among its numerous ones, is to help people manage the potential anxiety that would result from viewing one's existence as just a pointless exercise, always in peril, and inevitably terminated. The research we have reviewed provides ample support for this central role of religiousness.⁴¹

Taking that into consideration, religions and religiosity seem to be enormously helpful to humanity. Without any assurance that human existence does not end at the moment of death, life would perhaps be much more hollow to many.

Apparently, writers have been exploring the theme of death and the quest for immortality for a very long time:

If we fast-forward some millennia, we find the Epic of Gilgamesh – an ancient Sumerian written narrative believed to have originated around 3000 B.C. – describing the titular hero's confrontation with mortality and his quest for immortality. Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, embarks on a journey in search of immortality after his friend and companion Enkidu dies. Gilgamesh campaigns with the gods for immortality, but in the end, his pleas are denied and he is left with the inevitability of death.⁴²

As a story within the story, a struggle with death also appears in *The Deadly Hallows*, particularly in the *Tale of Three Brothers*, which was meant to be a simple tale with a moral message for children. Death, initially fooled by the brothers, finally found all of them. Moreover, the harder they tried to trick it, the more miserable they ended: trying to bring back the beloved ones resulted in such longing that in order to connect with them suicide appeared to be the best choice. Wise though Dumbledore was, he also had been seduced by the possibil-

⁴⁰ *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, directed by Peter Jackson, 2003.

⁴¹ M. Soenke, M. J. Landau, and J. Greenberg, *Sacred Armor: Religion's Role as a Buffer Against the Anxieties of Life and the Fear of Death*, in: *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality*, Vol.1, Context, theory, and research, eds. K. I. Pargament, J. J. Exline, and J. W. Jones 2013, p. 117.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

ity of being the “Master of Death,” which led him to a desperate pursuit of the Deadly Hallows. The quest resulted in a tragic death of his sister Ariana, which haunted him for the rest of his life. The stories of the three brothers and of Dumbledore show that the one who attempts to trick or defeat death is fated to fail. It is only when one reconciles with and accepts the inescapable destiny that they can leave this world peacefully. Interestingly enough, the indirect reason for Dumbledore’s death was one of the Hallows – the Resurrection Stone, which he tried to use, tempted by the possibility of seeing his long dead beloved family. Disregarding a powerful curse which turned out to be lethal, Dumbledore put on the ring. His yearning to be with those he loved killed him, exactly as it was depicted in the *Tale of Three Brothers*.

Harry’s life has been marked with the tragic death of his parents, an act of cruelty which shaped his entire future. It forced him to grow up very early. As a seventeen-year-old boy he accepts the fact that he has to volunteer to be killed. Despite feeling betrayed, frightened and reluctant to die, Harry understands that his sacrifice is inevitable so that others could live. By accepting his fate he becomes a savior figure of the wizarding world, and his surrender may be regarded as a powerful and symbolic act. The theme of sacrifice is well-known in religion and literature, for instance, in the Bible (Jesus Christ dying for human sins), the myth of Prometheus (Prometheus stealing fire for humans), *The Song of Roland* (Roland going down fighting in the rearguard), the myth of Prometheus (Prometheus stealing fire for humans), and other works by various authors. Thanks to showing extreme maturity and sense of duty Harry did not die, but his sacrifice “purified” him in the sense that a part of Voldemort that lived within Harry’s soul was simply destroyed. Consequently, the young protagonist becomes the master of death, as Dumbledore explains it: “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.”⁴³ Harry greeted death with his head held high, similarly to the third brother in the tale. Concluding, it can be said that Harry truly “mastered” death, the meaning of the word including “to embrace,” “to become perfect at something” and, finally, “to understand”. He truly understood the tenuous difference between mastering and conquering and thus he ultimately won.

Death itself is a tragic occurrence, but in Rowling’s saga it often happens to be purposeful, though its function is not always clear and understandable at

⁴³ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, pp. 720-721.

first. As Shawn E. Klein states in his study *Harry Potter and Humanity: Choices, Love, and Death*, it is our choices that are the most important factors when it comes to one's future:

Over and over again in the novels it is made clear that it is a person's choices and actions that are the defining elements of his moral character. It is not our ancestry, social roles, or wealth that makes us who we are. It is, as Albus Dumbledore tells Harry in *Chamber of Secrets*, "our choices ... that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities" (*CoS* p. 333). ... The choices made in the novels are not all for the good. Peter Pettigrew makes the choice to betray his friends and thus forever casts his lot with the forces of evil. We are told that Tom's mother, Merope Gaunt Riddle, chooses her own death instead of staying alive to care for her son.⁴⁴

Undeniably, many choices have a great impact on the plot and the process of shaping the personalities of characters. Their decisions frequently show their morality or its lack. Many characters, explicitly or not, expressed fear of death or its absence, as demonstrated by the case of Lily Potter, who chose not to live if her son were to be dead. Throughout the story Harry's personality develops, and, surprisingly, he does not grow terrified by the prospect of being killed, nor does he seem to be bothered until the very end with the possibility that the entire plot and plan are dramatically different from those he had in his mind. Although never desiring to escape from death, Harry quite often acted recklessly. His pure-heartedness is contrasted with particular mediocrity in magical skills and hot-tempered personality. Thus, to a great extent he relied on his friends' help, who often saved him even in the most hopeless situations. Despite his inability to effectively perform or accomplish any complicated task on his own, his motivation remains pure: to prevent Voldemort from rising to power once again and, ultimately, to prevent him from ruling the world.

There are some parallels and differences in the construction of the characters of Harry Potter and Voldemort. Both had miserable childhoods, yet their mothers could not have been more different from each other. Harry, although unconcerned with the possibility of being killed, was devastated by the deaths of his friend Cedric and godfather Sirius, for which he continued to blame himself. Voldemort, on the other hand, is never moved by the deaths of his followers. Death is omnipresent in the books and it would not be an exaggeration to

⁴⁴ S. Klein, *Harry Potter and Humanity: Choices, Love, and Death*, "Reason Papers" 2012, no. 1, p. 1.

say that Harry is chased by it. Both Voldemort and Harry attempt to escape from death, although in a very different sense. Furthermore, like Voldemort, Harry is “constantly associated with serpents. He is a Parselmouth, able to speak with snakes in their own language, and a descendant of another Parselmouth.”⁴⁵ The association with serpents is far more important than it initially seems, as Kerrie Anne Le Vivre notes:

As a symbol, the serpent conveys more than one meaning. It is associated with malice, deceit, and destruction through its Biblical depiction as the tempter of innocence; but its older meaning, derived from its ability to shed its skin, is that of regeneration – the renewal of life – and bodily immortality (Jobes 1469: both layers of meaning are appropriate to Lord Voldemort).⁴⁶

The concept of regeneration can apply to Voldemort. He was regarded as gone forever, and yet he was able to get his human body back in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. The transformation may be linked with the concept of the renewal of life, yet it involves deaths of innocent people, including Cedric Diggory.

In a later scene one of the scenes (during the battle of Hogwarts), Voldemort accuses Harry of cowardice and implies that the boy is responsible for Cedric’s death: “I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you. You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself.”⁴⁷ Indeed, it could be said that Harry escaped death, sometimes narrowly, because his friends or relatives sacrificed their lives for him in a more or less direct way. The perfect example is Sirius, who, as Hagrid claims, preferred to die fighting than stay idle:

“Look...” Hagrid leaned toward him across the table, “I knew Sirius longer ’n you did. ... He died in battle, an’ tha’s the way he’d’ve wanted ter go —”
 “He didn’t want to go at all!” said Harry angrily.
 Hagrid bowed his great shaggy head.
 “Nah, I don’ reckon he did,” he said quietly. “But still, Harry ... he was never one ter sit around at home an’ let other people do the fightin’. He couldn’ have lived with himself if he hadn’ gone ter help.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ K. A. Le Lievre, *Wizards and Wainscots: Generic Structures and Genre Themes in the Harry Potter Series*, p. 9.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴⁷ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, p. 550.

⁴⁸ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, London, 2003, pp. 854-855.

It can be concluded that sometimes, as depicted herein, there are things worth dying for. In the prospect of saving his godson's life, death ceases to be so appalling for Sirius. Nevertheless, despite his love for Harry, he does not wish to go back by choosing "feeble imitation of life instead."⁴⁹

In his essay *On Fairy Stories*, J. R. R. Tolkien wrote that fantasy often deals with the theme of immortality and "provides us with 'consolation' for our universal fear of death," emphasizing that his works were not different in this respect.⁵⁰ Andrew J. Deman states that the theme of death is also clearly exposed in the very first book of the Harry Potter series:

Upon hearing this, Harry wonders "If you're going to be cursed forever, death's better, isn't it?" thus showing us Harry's internal perspective on Voldemort's choice. Dumbledore himself confirms Harry's viewpoint at the end of the novel by telling Harry that "to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure." If we put these pieces together, the death theme Rowling uses is all laid out within the very first book.⁵¹

However, the representation of attitudes towards death is not exclusively limited to the points of view of Harry Potter, Albus Dumbledore or Lord Voldemort. There are plenty of characters who had an enormous influence on the story and its ultimate outcome, including Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Severus Snape, Sirius Black or Barty Crouch Jr. Death was also present in their lives with particular intensity. For instance, Ron's father was almost killed, his brother Fred died in a battle, and, as it has been mentioned, Sirius was murdered while rescuing Harry and his friends.

One person who certainly would not yearn for being immortal is Severus Snape. He remains inscrutable till the very end of the story, having deceived nearly everyone around him, even Voldemort. Considering his personality and actions, he is a truly interesting figure whose life was shaped by death of his beloved one. As Gregory Bassham claims in his essay *Choices vs. Abilities: Dumbledore on Self-Understanding*, drawing on Kant's philosophy, sometimes the actions of a person do not reveal much about his or her personality: "we can't truly know what choice a person makes unless we know their motive for

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 861.

⁵⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy Tales*, p. 22.

⁵¹ A. J. Deman, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Mortality Themes*, "Inverse" 2018, <<https://www.inverse.com/article/41709-harry-potter-series-and-death>> [29.04.2018].

deciding as they did.”⁵² As Johnson and Cureton argue in *Kant's Moral Philosophy*, humans possess limited cognition, and therefore may fail in judging someone's actions:

Kant thought that the only way to resolve this apparent conflict is to distinguish between phenomena, which is what we know through experience, and noumena, which we can consistently think but not know through experience. Our knowledge and understanding of the empirical world, Kant argued, can only arise within the limits of our perceptual and cognitive powers. We should not assume, however, that we know all that may be true about “things in themselves,” although we lack the “intellectual intuition” that would be needed to learn about such things.⁵³

In practice, therefore, a person's morality might sometimes (if not often) be found impossible to assess, especially when it comes to judging someone's actions. This is, according to Kant, due to the nescience of the motives of a subject, which may be utterly supervening. The issue of attempting to assess behaviour and personality of Severus Snape falls exactly into this category.

However hateful towards Snape Harry had been, this feeling increased after discovering that Snape is the one to be blamed for Harry's parents' tragic death. Snape decided then that he would protect Harry regardless of how many people die, especially to honor the boy's mother, to pacify his conscience and ease his grief. Death and pain accompanied him all along his tumultuous journey: although he did not have many friends, he has seen a lot people die. Sometimes he was forced to be the one who killed them, at other times he could only helplessly watch it happening. He grew insensitive to the risk of being killed. Additionally, when he learned that Harry “has been raised as pig for slaughter,”⁵⁴ he seemed to have completely lost his purpose in life. As for his relations with Voldemort himself, Snape became only another “tool” in Voldemort's quest to achieve immortality – one of many other followers. Eventually, to many readers' surprise, he is killed by Voldemort himself after the Dark Lord wrongly concluded who owned the elder wand. This was perhaps one of the saddest and most tragic deaths in the whole saga, which owes much to the fact that, as it

⁵² G. Bassham, *Choices vs. Abilities: Dumbledore on Self-Understanding*, “Reason Papers” 2012, no. 34.1, pp. 159-160.

⁵³ R. Johnson, and A. Cureton, *Kant's Moral Philosophy*, in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2004. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/kant-moral/>> [19.01.2019].

⁵⁴ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, p. 587.

turns out later, Snape remained loyal to Dumbledore and died because of the force more powerful than anything in the world – love. Despite his previous wrongdoings, this ultimate act redeems him in the eyes of Harry. Thus, Voldemort can be compared to the oldest brother from the *Tale of Three Brothers*, who aimed at fooling death by asking it for “a wand worthy of a wizard who had conquered Death,”⁵⁵ since both of them were killed by the very weapon they used.

Conclusion

Having discussed Tolkien's Great Escape and its relevance for the Harry Potter saga, it can be concluded that death is both a crucial theme and a central feature of the plot in Rowling's novels. The main characters have to deal with death, and the story demonstrates how individuals might react to hardships that occurred in their lives by choosing different paths. Although diverse actions might be taken in order to escape death, the ultimate message is that dying is inevitable and it takes utmost maturity to face it. In fact, as Tolkien wrote in his letters, death may as well be a blessing:

The Doom (or the Gift) of Men is mortality, freedom from the circles of the world. Since the point of view of the whole cycle is the Elvish, mortality is not explained mythically: it is a mystery of God of which no more is known than that ‘what God has purposed for Men is hidden’: a grief and an envy to the immortal Elves.⁵⁶

Moreover, death is present throughout a plethora of prominent fantasy texts, *The Lord of the Rings* being a prime example. It appears that its ubiquity helps readers to face the frightening perspective of dying. Tolkien's works are heavily influenced by religion, whose aim, among many, is to alleviate the fear of death. Consequently, it is not surprising that in its capacity to bring comfort and consolation, religion is salient in a myriad of works of literature including the Harry Potter saga.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 407.

⁵⁶ H. Carpenter, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p. 167.

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