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**Cultural Politics in Harry Potter:
Life, Death and Politics of Fear**

Cultural Politics in Harry Potter: Life, Death and Politics of Fear

Rubén Jarazo-Álvarez
Pilar Alderete-Diez

It's our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities
(Professor Dumbledore, *Chamber of Secrets* 1998, 245)

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Preface

Rubén Jarazo-Álvarez

Potter Studies cannot escape the conceptual and theoretical dilemmas raised by Cultural Politics and globalisation. Gunelius argues that Pottermania, as a global cultural phenomenon has its roots in turn-of-the-millennium consumerism (2008, 120). There are several precedents for such interpretations. According to Goff, state apparatuses “are instrumental in the global spread of internationally recognizable consumer brands, like Harry Potter” and the reception of such cultural products “reflect[s] on the implications of not just the penetration of foreign values, ideas, and images, but their prominence” (2006, 27–8). Such prominence is usually consumed according to our “cultural expectations” (Zipes 2001, 174) and, consequently, tensions between the ruling class in charge of constructing ideology and us, the cultural agents who participate in their legitimation, are usually marginalised. Moreover, as Wolosky observes, Foucault’s notion of power is also relevant (2010, 189) as the “most prominent allegory in Harry Potter [...] is a political one” (34). We therefore need to acknowledge the importance of Cultural Politics in the Potterverse and its academic legacy.

Several academics have contributed to Potter and Cultural Studies in the two decades since Zipes noted the relevance of cultural expectations in the saga. Abundant previous literature, such as Andrew Blake’s *The Irresistible Rise of Harry Potter* (2002), sought to explain how the literary and filmic phenomena have consolidated their position in Cultural Studies, and the reasons behind their worldwide success, with special emphasis on national discourses and Britishness. Blake’s observations have also been supported by a number of other scholars and studies. In the last ten years, other prominent publications, such as *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter* (Heilman 2009) or *Reading Harry Potter Again: New Critical Essays* (Anatol 2009), have successfully revealed relationships of power and representation in terms of identity, technology, representations of gender, cultural hegemony or even Critical Marxism (Rangwala 2009). In fact, Potter’s wizarding world cannot be understood without considering that its magical capital is “running out” (Hall 2011, 277), along with the sociocultural and economic consequences forced on wizards and mudbloods. Critical and political resistance have therefore become the primary defining characteristic of contemporary Potter Studies, as Barrat’s *The Politics of Harry Potter* (2012) concludes. All in all, the impact of Cultural Politics in the Potterverse has been, in some way or another, directly addressed in preceding decades. However, due to the new political climate in Europe and the US these days, there is much more room for theory in the Potterverse, especially following the release of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (2016), the *Fantastic Beasts* cinematic saga (2016, 2018) and Pottermore.

Power, legitimacy and difference may then be understood as defining aspects of the saga, especially when considering the representational ambiguity of cultural forms in the Potterverse; an ambiguity that naturalises difference in a Barthian sense (Flotmann 2014, 290). From a political perspective, J.K. Rowling and her fictional universe cannot escape “the ideological legacies of their ancestors” (Anatol 2003, 165). Consequently, as some intellectuals have noted, the Potterverse may be read as a “‘failed fantasy’ containing unsavory social normative messages” (Turner-Vorbeck 2009, 329–42), especially in terms of race, disability, gender, consumerism, social awareness and difference. Difference and indifference are then ingrained in Potter Studies and this volume offers

further critical analysis in this area. As the opening quotation stresses, choice matters, but marginality, trauma and immobility are also at the core of the Potterverse, limiting the agency of several minorities, who are not indeed reasonably represented. Ethnicity (Patterson 2004; Mendlesohn 2004; Horne 2010), non-heteronormative practices (Pugh and Wallace 2006; Mayes-Elma 2006), secondary heroes (McEvoy 2013) and even fandom (Farnel, 2016) are all limited by traditional binary oppositions that cannot be inextricably separated from national discourses and discrimination (Anatol 2003; Rana 2009 and 2011; Admiraal and Reitsma 2010). Thus, this book has been designed to approach new critical issues in the Potterverse with a collection of articles that comprises three broad topic areas: wizarding biopolitics and intersected discourses; death culture, trauma and anxiety; and politics of fear and postmodern transformations.

As a starting point, the first section of this volume deals with body politics and the way our perception of the world is limited through the transitory experience of embodiment, with “the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power’s problem” (Foucault 2003, 245). Corporeality, ethnicity and nation intersect in this first section, as well as the regulation of the gendered body, wizarding disability, consumerism and the religious trumping of corporeality. Considering political issues that permeate the first novels of the saga, such as materialism and capitalism in the post-Thatcher era (Westman 2004), this volume explores precisely what is cultural about wizarding biopolitics, and what is political about culture. Embodiment and interdependencies in this volume will address affective and political responses to difference, including indifference, which needs be considered in its double meaning, as referring to lack of empathy on the one hand, and assimilationist sameness on the other. This section will also address change and trauma as two essential cultural paradigms to understand many cultural and political implications in the saga.

The second section opens a thorough debate on death and trauma in the Potterverse, a debate that has occupied little space in academia, considering how important death is in the narrative continuum of the story. The Cultural Politics of life, death and resurrection grow as Harry ages and his universe expands. Death and suffering are associated with the return of the past, the re-enactment of trauma and the return of Harry’s repressed memories (Sanna 2014, 5), so this section not only investigates the cultural and political implications of death, but also examines the transformative power of suffering and guilt in both the fictional and the hyperdiegetic universe (Hills 2004, 511), since it is undeniable that transformation is also apparent in Rowling’s conception of her magical world (Neal 2008; Killinger 2009; Walls and Walls 2010). Throughout the section, the authors conduct an exhaustive examination of the origins and causes of the fear of death in the Western world from various perspectives. Cultural artefacts, death imagery, grief and sacrifice, and the development of resilience will be renegotiated.

Finally, terror and posthumanism are addressed in the concluding chapters of this book, with an emphasis on politics of fear and how they are enacted and (de)legitimatised in the original saga, in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and transmedia products. Terror and trauma are pivotal to understand the Potterverse after 9/11 (Ciba 2017), as well as the cultural politics of representation in social media (Sundmark 2018), the *Fantastic Beasts* cinematic saga or *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (Gymnich, Burkhard and Birk 2017). In this sense, and following the release of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (1997), little did we expect that the way we perceive Western civilisation would change so much on the verge of the new millennium. After 9/11, the

Bush administration and media apparatuses installed fear as a unique political force, pervading our lives – as well as our cultural and political subjectivity. Rowling’s concerns about fear are well documented. Such expressions as “You-Know-Who” or “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named” became dark allegories in the post-9/11 context and have acquired their full potential in this post-Brexit scenario and following Trump’s election. Lord Voldemort is, in fact, the livid representation of the end of a magical commonwealth. He not only strikes fear and terror into the wizarding community, he also represents the quintessential uncanny and monstrous “other” which defies nature. As a parasitic perversion of all that is good, he has become the “negative value corrupting the world” (Killinger 2002, 41), an inward process of perversion and corruption of his body, and by extension, an uncanny space (Žižek 2006, 125).

However, it is not only Voldemort who is crucial to understand Rowling’s Potterverse as a seminal work on fear, death and trauma. Many horrendous instances of violence are perpetrated in the saga. Death, trauma and terror, and how to deal with these issues, become dominant themes in this fictional universe, as the books “move from wonder, innocence, and comedy to fear, experience, and tragedy” (Behr 2009, 263), culminating with the *Fantastic Beasts* cinematic saga, as the filmic subtexts suggest. When the first instalment was premiered in 2016, media attention also focused on the United Kingdom and its referendum, widely perceived as a revival of conservative nationalism and the enactment of political fear against immigration at a global scale. In this context of economic, moral and political crisis, Rowling tweeted against the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union – “I don’t think I’ve ever wanted magic more” – and against Donald Trump’s proximity “to the nuclear codes”. Her words definitely resonate as a point of departure for this volume: the enactment of fear, death and trauma and the representation of in/difference.

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A Note on Abbreviated Book Titles

Due to the number of references to the books in the Harry Potter series, we have adopted the following convention.

Where referred to in the main text, we have generally used the following shortened forms of the titles:

- Philosopher's Stone / Sorcerer's Stone
- Chamber of Secrets
- Prisoner of Azkaban
- Goblet of Fire
- Order of the Phoenix
- Half-blood Prince
- Deathly Hallows

Where cited as a source of a quotation, we have used the following abbreviations

- PS (Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone)
- SS (Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone)
- CS (Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets)
- PA (Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban)
- GOF (Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire)
- OP (Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix)
- HBP (Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince)
- DH (Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows)
- TB (The Tale of the Three Brothers)

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Maria Isabel Escalas Ruiz is a funded PhD student at the University of the Balearic Islands (UIB, Majorca, Spain) in the Philology and Philosophy Programme. She has been awarded with the Santander Bank Foundation-UIB Prize for the best academic grades of her Doctoral Programme (2016). She holds a MA in Modern Languages and Literatures (Cultural and Literary Studies) and a BA in Spanish Philology (UIB). Her main lines of research are transmedia storytelling, the contemporary audiovisual children’s representations and the new critical methodologies in the Humanities. Since 2015 she has been working with the “Representation, Ideology and Reception in Audiovisual Culture” Research Unit at the UIB. She co-edited the book *Productos transmediáticos e imaginario cultural: Arqueología transmedia* with Patricia Trapero Llobera (Edicions UIB, 2017). She is a national delegate of SELICUP and member of YECREA. She is also representative of doctoral students on the Quality Assurance Commission of the Philology and Philosophy Doctoral Programme (UIB) and is assistant webmaster of the Faculty of Philosophy and Art (UIB).

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Anna Mackenzie (Lancaster University) gained her PhD in gender and genre in Shakespeare’s works in 2015. Anna is working on a digital humanities project which uses computational techniques to explore the representation of space and place in fantasy

literature. This research has the potential to provoke a step change in how literary scholars approach texts and could open up fantastic possibilities for work in this field. The *Harry Potter* series features prominently in Anna's digital humanities research as a pilot study. The larger project looks to extend the methodologies and approaches developed in the pilot study to include young adult and adult fantasy works by a range of international authors. Anna has recently developed the concept of "Applied Fantasy", demonstrating the potential for fantasy and science fiction literature and media to impact positively on mental health. She has published on gender and genre in Shakespeare and the eighteenth-century author Charlotte Smith. Her most recent article, "Missing Mothers on the Page and Stage: *Hamlet* and *Henry V*", was published in 2017. She is currently working on a book-length project based on her doctoral research and articles on approaching the digital humanities as a literary scholar.

Breanna Mroczek has a BA in English (2011) from the University of Calgary and a MA in English from the University of Alberta (2012). Building on her MA project, which used trauma theory to discuss Don DeLillo's 9/11 novel *Falling Man*, she presented a paper on *Harry Potter* and death at the "Magic is Might" conference at the University of Limerick in 2012. Since then, Breanna has written for and edited travel and lifestyle magazines while continuing to enjoy the Harry Potter universe. She is a proud Ravenclaw.

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(article by Pilar Alderete Diez)

Chapter 12: Death and How to Deal With it in the Harry Potter Series

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Abstract

It is obvious that death is one of the main issues in the Harry Potter world and the way it is underlined throughout the series opens up the ground for discussion of one of the most taboo topics in Western culture amongst children, although children's stories have always embroidered death into their plots – even as a character in its own right – demonstrating the fascination that humans of all ages have with the unknown stage of non-living.

This chapter was triggered, in particular, by the comments of a 13-year-old Spanish boy who reported that the last book helped him deal with the painful sudden death of his own mother, only weeks after publication. It was not the first time this adult-child dialogue about Harry Potter had informed research, and the result was this new adventure.

The main aim of this chapter will be to examine death in the books, its imagery, its language and the types of death to which children are exposed and the different options and role models offered for coping with the numerous, and often brutal, deaths. This chapter will also comment on the portrayal of grief and the strategies the characters use to cope with death. This analysis will search for connections to other well-known children's books and will attempt to map a portion of Death's territory in the imagination of contemporary children.

This chapter focuses on Harry Potter within the wider framework of children studies, in so far as it is relevant to understanding the purpose and origin of the analysis of death in the Harry Potter books presented below. The initial hypothesis that led to this analysis was prompted by the comments of a Spanish teenager. Children studies traditionally uses a child's point of view to guide research, and Harry Potter has provided the means of communication between introverted kids and the exploration of the topic of death. This teenager in particular, like many other young children and adolescents, used the plots and the characters to discuss his own problems and to try to overcome the obstacles that life had put in front of him. Witnessing his engagement with films and books provided this project with a way of understanding the sense of belonging in this shared Potterverse. It also created a new sense of trust, despite the age difference, between the child and the researcher.

This was not the author's first experience of drawing on a young reader's insights. In 2004, another young Spanish reader's comments had become the trigger for an article on the translation of humour and character voice into Spanish in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (OP, 2003).¹ So, from then on, it made sense that research into the Harry Potter world should be led by children's voices. That article offered some understanding of the world inside the Harry Potter industry, by interviewing many translators who have worked with the Harry Potter texts as well as the communities that had developed around

it, online and in Ireland. This community of Harry Potter readers and fans of all ages (but mostly kids) brought about a local event– “Harry Potter Week in Galway” – run by child volunteers and adults alike, with a series of workshops, activities, events, book discussions and even radio presentations in public libraries around the city of Galway. Needless to say, the event was a great experience, and a humbling one to see the level of scholarly research that these kids were showing, cross-referencing between Harry Potter and other books they were reading. The myth that most children nowadays do not read was completely undermined by these young avid readers.

During the summer of 2007, the research that led to this article was prompted by an event in a child’s life and his response to it. This 13-year-old lost his mother to a heart attack. We tend to react to a sudden death, especially of a parent or family member, in a way that emphasizes how unusual such an experience must have been. Unfortunately, both reactions tend to disenfranchise the person even more (Boyd Webb 2010, 91). Although statistics show that the impact of the death of a parent during school years in the UK and Ireland is very high, schools and educational institutions are ill prepared to counsel these kids in an effective and empowering manner. In any case, it was not just the death of a parent that made Harry Potter’s experience relevant in this instance, but the child’s reaction to his mother’s death. On the days surrounding the funeral, he constantly referred to a print-out of an online pirate Spanish translation of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (which had just been published in English a month and a half before and had no official translation yet). The book is known for how painful and grim it is, due to the death of so many key characters and the darkness of the conflict depicted in it. When asked about it, the boy’s answer was clear and vague at the same time: “It kind of helps.” Those four words inspired a letter to J.K. Rowling’s assistants telling how a 13-year-old who had just gone through one of the most life-changing experiences in his life was using her books to deal with the grief that life had in store for him. The response arrived a few months later with kind words and a plush Fluffy and Pigwidgeon that both this teenager and his younger brother – who was seven at the time – welcomed; and they both still have these two ‘pets’ on their pillows, as a token of external support at such a difficult time.

The teenager’s comment opened a door into the world of death in children’s literature and specifically the relevance of the Harry Potter series to this particular issue. It is not surprising that other researchers and authors had been thinking along these lines as well, for instance the wonderful *The Children Who Lived. Using Harry Potter and Other Fictional Characters to Help Grieving Children and Adolescents* (Markell and Markell 2008) which provides the teacher or caregiver with suggestions and exercises about how to use Harry Potter to deal with death and grief; or *Not Just a “Rather Nasty Experience”: Loss and Longing in Modern Young Adult Fantasy* (Schultz 2009) which explores the ways in which this new paradigm of orphaned teenagers, in modern fantasy texts such as Harry Potter and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* move through the grieving process.

What is death in the Harry Potter world?

Until the 1970s, children’s literature toned down or removed topics considered disturbing for children, such as death. Even though there has been a more direct treatment of death in art and literature since the end of the twentieth century, it remains a taboo in the Western world and certainly in discussions with children. Deathologists denounce the fact that “death recedes further and further away from day to day experience” (Bryant 2003, 9). This separation of death from our daily lives and our difficulty in speaking about it leaves teachers and caretakers ill prepared when dealing with bereavement. Children, though, seem to develop an interest in death at an early age (Leaman 1995, 10) and their curiosity is likely to guide them into researching death or asking questions. Taub and Servaty-Seib point out that children turn to magical explanations in the absence of

information (2009, 14). They are left to their own devices as they encounter numerous deaths through media, cartoons, video games and TV news and programmes (23). Rasekh and Shomoossi agree that “any form of literature will influence children’s worldviews” (2008, 393) and from this has stemmed much criticism of Rowling’s works. The majority of these critics, though, assume that children accept the knowledge provided without questioning or critical enquiry.

Death is a very prominent topic in the Harry Potter books, as Rowling herself has stated. Indeed, she has been quoted as saying that her books are largely about death (Spilsbury 2011). In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, she declared that it was no coincidence that Harry’s journey through the books was to deal with death in its many forms – to ponder about what it means to die, what it does to those that are left alive and what it means to survive death.ⁱⁱ The series begins by presenting the readers with the utmost fear of any child, “the loss of his parents” (Lake 2003, 518). At this stage, readers are not yet aware of the importance of death as a topic in the overall plot. It is only in *Half-Blood Prince* that the meaning and importance of Horcruxesⁱⁱⁱ is revealed. The main weakness of the protagonist’s arch-enemy, another orphan, his reason for becoming a serial killer^{iv} and a powerful lord, is the fear of death. Voldemort states his own fear emphasizing that there is nothing worse than death (*OP* 2003, 718). Dumbledore’s reply could not be more enlightening with regard to Rowling’s open criticism of the fear of death. As Granger points out, death is definitely not the worst evil (Granger 2002, 5) echoing Dumbledore’s criticism of Voldemort’s lack of understanding these matters (*OP* 2003, 718).

Dumbledore also felt the fear and the lure of disempowering death in his own search for the Deathly Hallows, which are Death’s three gifts to the Peverell brothers: the Elder Wand, the Resurrection Stone and the Invisibility Cloak. *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* draws on many folk stories, such as “Godfather Death” or “The Master-smith”,^v which can be found throughout Europe. These tales always offer the same coda: The universality of Death and the fact that, although you may be able to trick him, you can neither persuade him nor avoid him permanently. This universal fear of death drives the young Tom Riddle towards a quest for immortality, a recurrent topic in children’s fiction and fantasy. In his search for immortality, he becomes the giver of death, relying on it as a means of survival, and so he calls his disciples Death Eaters. The only way to conquer death for Lord Voldemort is to feed on it, to administer death to others in order to secure as many parts of his soul as possible. He sings his own praises stating that he has “gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality. You know my goal – to conquer death” (*GOF* 2000, 566).

Fear of death is stressed as a key trait of Harry’s nemesis, Voldemort, in his attempt to conquer death. However, it is also repeatedly depicted as dangerous in the Harry Potter world. Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington, more commonly known as Nearly Headless Nick, confesses to Harry that the reason he returned as a ghost is because he feared death too much and failed to go on as he should (*OP* 2003, 759). Conversely, the lack of fear or the willingness to sacrifice yourself is paramount, as the note left by Regulus Black (Sirius’ brother) explains: “I face death in the hope that when you meet your match you will be mortal once more” (*HBP* 2005, 569). From the beginning of the story, the texts show that there is a third way to escape from death, which is also repeatedly stated throughout the book. The reason why Harry is so famous is that he survived the killing curse with a gift that made him immortal. This gift was his mother’s love, which would add Harry to a long list of such heroes saved by the love of their mothers: Heros, Paris, Romulus, Oedipus, Hercules and Cyrus (Thury 2005, 10). As early as the first book in the series, Harry is told that his mother died to save him. Sacrifice is the ultimate way to

undo death in the Harry Potter world.

The first book opens with the theme of the Philosopher's Stone which can be used to create the Elixir of Life, but even the creator of the Stone, after having enjoyed an extraordinarily long life, decides to die and so, Dumbledore explains that "to the well-organised mind, death is but the next great adventure" (*PS* 1997, 215). In the first book in the series, readers witness the early stages of Harry's grieving process for his parents. Attending the same school as his parents, Harry inevitably looks for signs of their presence. The Mirror of Erised shows Harry's extended family, the thing he yearns for most. And once again, Dumbledore assumes the task of delivering truthful advice when he says to Harry that "it does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that" (*PS* 1997, 157). It is through Dumbledore, who treats truth very carefully, that 11-year-old Harry discovers that "no spell can reawaken the dead" (*GOF* 2000, 605) [...] " 'The Truth,' Dumbledore sighed. 'It is a beautiful and terrible thing and should therefore be treated with great caution' " (*PS* 1997, 216). And here Dumbledore admits to Harry that the second characteristic of death even in the magical world is its irreversibility.

In *Deathly Hallows*, Harry's near-death experience follows the pattern of such existing accounts in sociological research. It ticks nine of the eleven characteristics of near-death experiences in secular eschatology, as identified in the *Handbook of Death and Dying* (Bryant 2003, 137). Throughout Chapter 35, Harry is there but at the same time he is a spectator of the whole scene, feeling as if he is out of his own body, which is still in the Hogwarts grounds. There is a sense of peace. He meets Dumbledore and a strange embryonic form of Lord Voldemort. He feels like a being of light. He reviews the previous events. He has the chance to come back because death is the ultimate departure point; the image of the station reinforces the sense that in the Harry Potter world death is not the end (Granger 2002, 54). The noises behind the veil through which Sirius fell in *Order of the Phoenix* as he passed away reinforce this image, suggesting that the archway leads somewhere else.

Another character who plays an important role in Harry's process of learning about death through the course of the series is Luna Lovegood. She also appears as a character, not unlike Dumbledore, who has the task of delivering truths about death, as she looked it in the eye when her mother died through a failed experiment. In *Order of the Phoenix*, she also seems to believe that one day she will meet her mother again. However, Rowling does not go on to describe what this place beyond life looks like: " 'What do 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-?' " (*OP* 2003, 759). Rowling creates the Department of Mysteries (where the veil is located) as the area within the Ministry of Magic where inconclusive research on matters such as time, thought and death is conducted. In fact, Dumbledore in Harry's imagination seems to believe that this afterlife location would depend on the person dying and would draw on their own imagery, as Harry chooses King's Cross Station for the location of this 'near-death dream'.

Moving on, let us explore the causality of death in the Harry Potter world. In a rather forensic manner, here is the list of the causes of death in the series in an attempt to provide a comprehensive depiction of how Rowling introduces the relevance of causality in portraying death.

- **Accident:** Mrs Lovegood, Gibbon (Thorfinn Rowle, fellow Death Eater), Kendra Dumbledore (by her own daughter), Vincent Crabbe, Tom Riddle.
- **Azkaban:** Morfin Gaunt.

- **Battle:** Hedwig, Nymphadora Tonks, Remus Lupin, Fred Weasley, Dobby (dignified), Colin Creevey, Bellatrix Lestrange (good).
- **Childbirth:** Merope Gaunt.
- **Consumption, Curse or Dark Magic:** Professor Quirrell (good), Regulus A. Black.
- **Death Penalty:** Buckbeak, Bartemius Crouch Jr.
- **Euthanasia or Assisted Death.**^{vi} Albus Dumbledore (good).
- **Fright:** Bilius (saw a Grim).
- **Murder:** Harry's parents, Cedric Diggory, Amelia Bones, Emmeline Vance, Bertha Jorkins, Frank Bryce, Barty Crouch Sr, Tom Riddle Sr, Thomas Riddle, Mary Riddle, the McKinnons, the Prewetts, Fenwick, Dean Thomas' father, Bones, Hepzibah Smith, Igor Karkaroff, Florean Fortescue, Mrs Abbot, Atioch Peverell, Alastor Moody, Rufus Scrimgeour, Gregorovitch, Gellert Grindelwald, numerous Muggles.
- **Falling through the Veil:** Sirius Black.
- **Falling:** Scabior (from a bridge).
- **Ghosts:** Sir Nicholas (beheaded by Muggles), Bloody Baron (suicide – good), the Grey Lady (murder), Fat Friar (unknown), Moaning Myrtle (murder/Basilisk), Professor Binns (unknown).
- **Illness:** Mrs Crouch.
- **Inability to look after oneself:** Marvolo Gaunt.
- **Mauling:** Montgomery (by werewolf), Bathilda Bagshot (snake), Severus Snape (dignified).
- **Old age:** Nicholas and Perenelle Flamel (good and dignified), Aragog (good), Armando Dippet.
- **Overfeeding:** Hagrid's flobberworms.
- **While asleep:** Professor Binns.
- **Unknown:** Evan Rosier, Wilkes, Cadmus Peverell's fiancée, Percival Dumbledore, Ariana Dumbledore, Ted Tonks, Dirk Cresswell, Gornuk.
- **Suicide:** Cadmus Peverell (poison), Peter Pettigrew (his own hand), Harry Potter (Altruistic Suicide [Kastembaum 1998, 203]).^{vii}

According to Sandman, humans conceptualize death in two ways: good and bad. A good death would deprive the person of a bad future, whereas a bad death would deprive them of a good future (2005, 19). Most controversial is Albus Dumbledore's death. Cursed by the Horcrux inhabiting the ring, he would have died a while later as the curse spread due to the lack of a known countercurse. Faced with this situation, he decides to play with his

own life in a way that allows him to sacrifice it for others. His act is more significant because he rejects suicide so that he can prevent a child, Draco Malfoy, from splitting his soul through murder. Instead, he chooses death delivered by the hands of one whose soul is already tainted: Severus Snape. This killing also protects Snape by marking him as a loyal servant of the Dark Lord when he is really working against his supposed master, and so benefits the greater scheme of things, the greater good, which always seemed to be Albus Dumbledore's project. There is a double sacrifice in this important turning point at the end of *Half-Blood Prince*. Albus Dumbledore chooses a premature death, sacrificing his time to save Draco's soul, and Severus Snape chooses to accept the task of killing for the same reason. It is important to notice how Rowling presents the death of the best-known house elf in the series compared to the previous deaths in the story. Dobby's death has been qualified as dignified, following Sandman's definition by which a dignified death implies a sense of self-esteem (2005, 49) and homage by a peaceful public service (136). Harry ensures that the house elf is buried in a ceremonial manner and he takes the task of the burial upon himself, portraying a new maturity in relation to death.

This act of publicly honouring the dead is an important tool in grieving (Granger 2002, 60). Nicholas Flamel also attains the status of a dignified death, for having brought all worldly affairs to completion (3). In any case, the range of causes of death in the Harry Potter series helps to counteract "the mistaken notion that death is some kind of abnormality of our existence: an evil force" (Taub and Seib-Servaty 2009, 23). The variety of scenarios in which death occurs was originally the second trigger for this presentation. As spectators and readers, we are used to death that drags on and on in films and series. It has always been a challenge for writers and film-makers to portray death and the dying process in a convincing manner. An episode that always struck me in the series is the way that Sirius Black is killed. Contrary to the film, the text does not explicitly show the killing curse: "the second jet of light hit him squarely on the chest" (*OP* 2003, 710). But a few sentences below, the readers identify this as the death that had been announced before publication of the fifth book, since it follows the conventional pattern of showing death: "It seemed to take Sirius an age to fall: his body curved in a graceful arc as he sank backwards through the ragged veil hanging from the arch" (710). Harry does not read these signs and shows disbelief: "Sirius had only just fallen through the archway, he would reappear from the other side any second [...] But Sirius did not reappear" (711), writes Rowling, reinforcing the notion of the irreversibility of death. Rowling plays with Harry's disbelief, inoculating the reader with the same doubt. For the next few months and years, until the final book was released, the absence of a clear cause of death made some readers and online forums speculate about the possibility of Sirius Black returning through the veil. Identifying with Harry, the readers wondered why and complained at how unfair it was to kill off Harry's godfather when he could finally have gained some respite and Harry would have benefited from it. These questions and complaints are commonly posed by the bereaved when they have suffered an unexpected death or live through a process of terminal disease. Even if the child understands the universality and irreversibility of death, it is much more difficult to accept its non-functionality and causality.

Other non-functional deaths are what conflict jargon calls collateral damage. In an online forum (Stringer 2010), Christopher Bell pointed out that, although meaningless, those deaths are really hard to deal with. Vincent González argued that the deaths of Fred and Hedwig, although peripheral to the plot, are not meaningless. He suggested that there are a few deaths offered as back story that may be understood as meaningless, such as those of Luna's mother, of Rowena Ravenclaw, or of the loose ends of the Black family tree,

but that “to situate all death within a great conflict of this sort might be a form of honesty but it is the honesty Barthes calls operation margarine” (González, quoted in Stringer 2011). What he points out with this Barthesian reference is that these deaths are the responsibility of all parties involved in the conflict and not just of the Death Eater armies. Another controversial issue in the deaths listed above is the killing of Bellatrix Lestrange by Mrs Weasley, accompanied by the famous line: “NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!” (*DH* 2007, 589). The members of the Order of the Phoenix are depicted throughout the book as using defensive mechanisms and avoiding the killing curse. The controversial scene describes Harry running to defend Ginny, but Mrs Weasley knocks him off course and takes over the task of administering Bellatrix’s cathartic death. In Harry Potter’s world, mothers are your most powerful weapon.

And, of course, there is Harry Potter’s own death, labelled as altruistic suicide for this chapter’s purposes, following Kastenbaum’s categories: “I didn’t defend myself! I meant to let him kill me!” (*DH* 2007, 567). At the end of the book, the idea of sacrifice comes back. Harry understands his true nature and willingly accepts the challenge of embracing death at the young age of 17. He is utterly convinced that, in order to destroy this serial killer and to stop his friends dying and suffering, he himself needs to die. The first time it was conceptualized as a suicidal drive, it felt uneasy, demonizing the books just as so many detractors of Rowling’s work have done before. How could Harry’s choice influence teenagers who experience depression and who believe they are part of the problem and that the world would be better off without them? Harry makes the decision on his own without consulting Ron and Hermione, with whom he has shared most of his other decisions, and uses the Invisibility Cloak to walk to his own death. He isolates himself on purpose and takes the route which he believes (through Snape’s memories in Dumbledore’s Pensieve) is the only solution to the war: “Snape looked horrified. ‘You have kept him alive so that he can die at the right moment?’ ” (*DH* 2007, 551). In the Harry Potter world, Harry accepts and embraces death and he is allowed to go on living – although he could have chosen not to, as Dumbledore makes clear in his near-death experience. In the real world, teenagers and adults alike suffer depression and they feel the weight of their world on their shoulders. Unfortunately, their acceptance and embrace of death has more tragic consequences than in our protagonist’s magical world.

Coping with death and the grieving process in the Harry Potter world

“Numbing the pain for a while will make it worse when you feel it.” (*GOF* 2000, 603)

Todd Waters stated on the forum mentioned above that kids who lose one or both parents may find solace from identifying with Harry Potter (Stringer 2011) as seemed to be the case with the teenager that inspired this research, who after being asked about what actually helped in the book, replied “he had it much worse”. Rowling has engaged in a detailed depiction of post-traumatic stress disorder as a consequence of death. Harry suffers from sleep disturbances, concentration and memory problems, intrusive thoughts, heightened alertness for danger and a foreshortened future (*OP* 2003, 13) but Rowling has also presented her readers with one of the most resilient characters in children’s literature. (For “resilience”, this article uses Bonnano’s definition: an ability to cope with difficulties under stress, to deal with change and uncertainty, and to recover faster from traumatic episodes [Barnard et al. 1999, 57; Bonanno cited in Konigsberg 2012].) The new research on successful grieving processes has borrowed this concept from physics, where it denotes an ability to reshape after bending, stretching or compressing.^{viii} Their international project with data collected from 30 countries shows that factors that foster resilience in individuals include self-esteem, family cohesion and external support

(Barnard et al. 1999, 58). Harry's self-esteem strengthens as he attends Hogwarts, and it would be interesting to map the curve of this self-esteem as he overcomes the different obstacles.

Another interesting line of research would be to research how a stronger self-esteem and isolation bring about a heightened sense of self, after his disenfranchised summer between *Goblet of Fire* and *Order of the Phoenix* and at the end of *Deathly Hallows*, when he has to make decisions on his own. It is not advisable, after all, to face death alone (Granger 2002, 59). Resilience studies move away from Kubler-Ross's diagram of the five stages of grief: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (Kubler-Ross 1997, 251). As this pattern is very well known, Rowling was almost certainly aware of it when she wrote about how Harry copes with his direct experience of the death of Cedric Diggory and Sirius Black. Case studies conducted in 30 countries, looking at responses to death, suggest that the majority of bereaved people do not grieve but are resilient. And Harry's main virtue is his resilience. It is very important for him as a character to get on with his life (Granger 2002, 60). Although lacking family cohesion, he adopts a chosen family – mainly Dumbledore, Sirius, Remus, Hermione, Ron and Luna – and never lacks external support.

The use of humour as a tool to cope with death appears most prominently after Cedric's death. Fred and George's successful joke shop is offered as a solution to endure the challenging times ahead when Harry insists that they accept his prize money from the Triwizard Tournament: "I don't want it and I don't need it. But I could do with a few laughs. We could all do with a few laughs. I've got a feeling we're going to need them more than usual before long" (*GOF* 2000, 635). This type of grieving reaction is described as "counterintuitive" whereas Cho Chang's attitude (frightened, melancholic, depressed) throughout *Order of the Phoenix* is an expected expression of grief. According to Adams and Deveau, humour and laughter stimulate the cardiovascular system, help to promote deeper breathing, relax the diaphragm, exercise the muscular system (especially the facial muscles), promote synchronization between the two hemispheres of the brain, rebalance the endocrine system by activating natural painkillers and increasing alertness, and generate feelings of sharing, togetherness and intimacy (Adams and Deveau 1995, 75). In other words, they generate a feeling of well-being that supports recovery and resilience. The youngest bereaved brother in this article used to complain about people visiting them after the funeral, and his father scolded him about it. His irritated answer was that it was all right if they came to make him laugh, but not to make him more depressed. It is not easy to master the use of humour to alleviate mourning but it clearly has benefits that Rowling is aware of.

Luna is very important as a character in relation to death because the origin of the bond between Luna and Harry and the way it gets reinforced highlights death as a common experience. It first appears when Harry and Luna are the only students who can see the Thestrals or winged skeletal horses that pull the carriages to the castle (only those who have experienced the death of somebody close to them can see the Thestrals). And the link is emphasized again towards the end of the book when the only two people who can hear the voices behind the veil are Harry and Luna. This is not the only bond that seems to give successful results in coping with death. Kubler-Ross's concept of grief had led to the assumption that grieving involved severing bonds with the deceased (Silverman et al. 1996, 22). However, Bonanno's research on resilience understands grief instead as the process of constant construction and reconstruction of new connections and new bonds (quoted in Silverman et al. 1996, 219). The theory of continuing bonds favours accommodation instead of closure. The grieving person goes through a shift in self-perception, and renews his or her bonds with the deceased through the different phases of

grieving. As readers, we witness this process of accommodation with Harry's relationship with his parents. The dead live on in those that loved them (Granger 2002, 56) and they will always be with them: "You think that the dead we loved truly leave us?" (PA 1999, 312).

The first phase of this process is locating the deceased (Silverman 1996, 77). It all starts in *Philosopher's Stone* when Harry finds his parents – and other members of his family – in the Mirror of Erised: "There reflected behind him were at least ten others" (1997, 153). And it continues in the cemetery in Godric's Hollow: "Harry, they're here... right here. And he knew by her tone that it was his mother and father this time. [...] He moved towards her, feeling [...] a grief that had actually weighed on his hearts and lungs" (DH 2007, 268). The second phase is experiencing the deceased (Silverman 1996, 77), and this happens at the end of *Goblet of Fire* when Harry's parents come out of Voldemort's wand as a result of the *Priori Incantatem* effect: "'Your mother's coming,' [James Potter] said quietly. 'She wants to see you... It'll be all right. Hold on.'" [...] "'When the connection is broken, we will linger for only moments... but we will give you time... You must get to the Portkey. It'll return you to Hogwarts.'" (GOF 2000, 579). The third phase involves reaching out (Silverman 1996, 76), and we see this in *Deathly Hallows*, when Harry confronts death and openly asks for help and for clear information about what it means to die: "'You're nearly there.' said James. 'Very close. We are so proud.'" (DH 2007, 560). Harry wonders if it is painful: "'Dying? Not at all,' said Sirius. 'Quicker and easier than falling asleep.'" (561).

The fourth phase is not portrayed explicitly in the Harry Potter books. It involves "waking memories" (Silverman 1996, 77) and, as Harry lost his parents when he was a baby, he finds this very difficult, as we see in his attempts to conjure a Patronus with the help of Remus Lupin in *Prisoner of Azkaban*. The fifth phase, which involves "linking objects", is there from the beginning, when Harry's own eyes and hair are identified by others as his mother's eyes and his father's hair, and this is reinforced by the legacy of the Invisibility Cloak (Silverman 1996, 66). This concept of grief is more operative since it involves active participation by the bereaved in the emotional relocation of the deceased. Arguably, the process that Harry goes through in *Deathly Hallows* with regards to Dumbledore is even more interesting. The entire book in fact involves the posthumous rediscovery of Dumbledore through Harry's eyes and the redefinition of his relationship with him. Harry struggles even more with Dumbledore's death because his absence is more meaningful than the absence of parents he barely remembers: "Dumbledore, like Mad-Eye, like Sirius, like his parents, like his poor owl, all were gone where Harry could never talk to them again" (DH 2007, 74).

Equally difficult is Neville Longbottom's situation, which portrays the grief and resilience of people who experience a different kind of loss, since it involves the emotional and physical relocation of his mentally ill parents. Although Rowling does not develop Neville's process of coping with the loss of his parents, who have not died but do not share the same realm of consciousness, the reader may interpret his strength in the final battle as a conclusion to his own process of becoming more resilient from his early weakening reactions to his situation, as a result of which he was almost declared a non-magical being (DH 2007, 586)

Literature on bereavement processes and grief also identifies a gradual development progress from immature to mature understanding of death. According to the Young Child Hypothesis, children between the ages of two and seven tend to gear towards magical thinking. As they do not differentiate between thoughts and actions, they may feel guilty as Harry does after Sirius' death (OP 2003, 727). Children at this age consider death temporary and reversible. According to the Latency-Age Child theory, between the ages

of seven and eleven children come to the realization that death is irreversible and that it happens to the elderly and weak. Typical reactions from this age group include inability to deal with death, denial, hiding feelings, guilt, anger, becoming over helpful, somatic symptoms and anxiety (Boyd Webb 2010, 5–7). The Prepubertal Child theory postulates that between the ages of nine and twelve, children achieve a mature understanding of death. Boyd Webb warns us against taking the age markers literally, as they vary from person to person in the way they engage with their own and others' vicarious experiences. As previously noted, the main features of a mature understanding of death include its universality, irreversibility, non-functionality and causality (Taub and Servaty-Seib 2009, 24). Their responses are characterized by a feeling of helplessness and fear or numbness, regression to a younger age, conflict between the desire to behave as an adult and the wish to be nourished like a child, guilt, anger and self-centredness (Boyd Webb 2010, 8). These four characteristics of the mature understanding of death are exposed through the different deaths in the series:

- **Universality** – “The Tale of the Three Brothers” is offered as a myth to understand this reality.
- **Irreversibility** – This notion is normally delivered through Dumbledore’s discussions with Harry throughout the series, although Remus Lupin and Sir Nicholas also play a part in delivering this knowledge.
- **Non-functionality** – The first time this notion appears is with regard to the death of Cedric Diggory, but all the casualties of the war and odd deaths described above would fit into this description.
- **Causality** is proven wrong from the very beginning when Harry survives the death curse, therefore demonstrating that the causes of death are unpredictable, as are the causes of survival.

Harry achieves his maturity with regards to his perception of death when he rejects the possibility of Dumbledore coming back, a possibility prompted by the identity of Dumbledore’s Patronus (and pet) a Phoenix: “The idea that Dumbledore had managed to come back to them (...) would have been inexpressibly comforting. (...) ‘Dumbledore’s dead,’ he said. ‘I saw it happen. I saw the body. He’s definitely gone’ ” (*DH* 2007, 317). Now Harry has become the messenger and is helping Ron come to terms with this mature perception of death while Hermione is exacerbated by Ron’s insistently childish view of it. In contrast with the mature understanding of death that Harry displays, Voldemort’s “pursuit of death shapes him into a child that can never grow up” (Mills 2009, 254). Like Voldemort, readers can carry the remains of this scared inner child for the rest of their lives.

Conclusions

There is a recurrent concern with death in literature. The Harry Potter series is one of the many literary and cultural texts that deal with death directly. Thus, they bridge the gap between life and death by bringing the deaths of fictional characters closer to readers and viewers in a very descriptive manner. Writing and reading about death can help the reader explore and balance fears, curiosities and even desires of death. Our human curiosity about death has remained a constant throughout history and has been observed in many anthropological studies. More pressing is the need of children to investigate the state of “non-living”. Their intrinsic curiosity does not stop at the issue of death. It leads them along a path to coming to terms with what may seem a ludicrous loss. Fiction makes real experiences not real and therefore easier to manage. Fantasy writing can provide a catalyst

for discussion of situations that would be tricky for a child to cope with in a more direct manner.

The Harry Potter books have attracted millions of readers, and children have been exposed to the treatment of death in the books. The abundance of deaths in the books challenges the readers to engage, along with Harry, in a process of understanding or coming to terms with what it means to die, what it means to those that are left alive and what it means to survive death. By empathizing with the protagonist of the series, or with other characters to whom the reader feels close, Rowling passes on her perspective on death. Her portrayal of a huge variety of deaths and the conversations between Harry and other characters about death help readers who engage with Harry's reflections to move towards a mature understanding of death. The inclusion of the four categories – universality, irreversibility, non-functionality and causality – through different conversations with Dumbledore, Lupin, Luna, and ghosts such as Sir Nicholas and Moaning Myrtle, contributes to the demystification of death and its acceptance as a natural part of the experience of living.

The opposite of acceptance in this case is fear. Fear of death is portrayed negatively throughout the novels. Its function is dismissed as futile and, therefore, the reader would feel with Harry that it needs to be avoided at all costs. Likewise, sacrifice is paramount to conquering death. The different examples of personal sacrifice in the books (of Lily, Dumbledore, Snape, Regulus and of Harry himself) are praised and deemed functional, redemptive and restorative.

The grieving process is vividly depicted in the Harry Potter books and, again, readers are presented with a variety of attitudes and reactions, both positive and negative: Luna's open attitude and freedom of speech about her mother's death, Cho's heartbroken depression after Cedric's murder, and the range of Harry's reactions – loss, empowerment, doubts, strength, loneliness – through the different books in the series. Humour, friendship and the redefinition of bonds with the deceased are offered as tools in the process of coping with death. The sense of community experienced through death and the bonds that develop because of the common experience of death highlight the fact that grieving well is a civic responsibility (Granger 2002, 60). Harry's resilience is celebrated so that the reader is offered yet another way to deal with death which does not necessarily involve a long grieving process.

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ⁱ Diez-Alderete, Pilar. 2005. "Harry Potter is Funny. The tricky task of translating humour and character voices into Spanish" MA Diss. NUI Galway. <https://aran.library.nuigalway.ie/handle/10379/6809>

ⁱⁱ For the full interview, see *The Brilliant Mind Behind Harry Potter*, <http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/The-Brilliant-Mind-Behind-Harry-Potter/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Horcruxes are objects in which a murderer hides part of his soul, ripped apart by the act of killing another being, in order to enhance the murderer's chances of survival.

^{iv} Rowling has been quoted as saying: "If you are writing about evil, which I am, and if you are writing about someone who's essentially a psychopath – you have a duty to show the real evil of taking human life" (Taub and Servaty-Seib 2009, 22).

^v For a full version of these tales, see D.L. Ashliman's website at the University of Pittsburgh: <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/folktexts.html>. This folktale archive also traces some other folktales which J.K. Rowling may have drawn on, such as the different versions of the Hand of Glory.

^{vi} “ ‘Yes Dumbledore's dead (...) He chose his own manner of dying, chose it months before he died, arranged the whole thing’ ” (*DH 2007*, 593).

^{vii} For a more detailed list, see http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/List_of_deaths

^{viii} For more information about this line of research, visit ‘Loss, Trauma and Emotion Lab’ at <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/LTElab/>