

# Characterization through death in the harry potter series



## Introduction

Author of the Harry Potter series, J. K. Rowling is best known for her children's books about a young boy who learns he is a wizard and goes on to have epic adventures. However, this book series is different from other children's books in that it contains many dark themes and subjects, one of which is death. Harry Potter, the protagonist of the Harry Potter series, is an orphan who learns that he is a wizard and belongs to the world of magic, but must also face Voldemort, the man who murdered Harry's parents and attempted (and failed) to murder him when he was a baby. After becoming the only person to survive the killing curse and an encounter with Voldemort, Harry became known as "the boy who lived"[1]. Harry's life was founded in death, so it must shape his life in many ways. Harry is also plagued by a prophecy about him and Voldemort which states that "neither can live while the other survives"[2]. Harry knows that he must either kill Voldemort or be killed by Voldemort, and he has made choices and defined himself with that in mind. Voldemort, the primary antagonist of the Harry Potter series, is a dark wizard who attempts to take over the wizarding world and kill the only person to ever thwart him: Harry Potter. Voldemort had "tried to kill the Potter's son, Harry [but] he couldn't... [and] when he couldn't kill Harry Potter, Voldemort's power somehow broke." [3] Voldemort had already come closer to death than anyone else, and he now is determined to find a way to become immortal, which is one of his driving goals. Voldemort's goal is "to conquer death." [4] Voldemort's primary motive is to conquer death, and this affects his actions and thus his character. In the Harry Potter series by J. K.

Rowling, the theme of death is employed to show various characteristics of Harry Potter and Voldemort, as well as to contrast the two characters.

Body

Morality and Mortality

Death is inevitable, and eventually, every person encounters and must respond to it. However, even though death is a universal experience, one's response to it varies depending on one's personality. Some may react with fear, while others react with stoicism. Rowling acknowledges this common occurrence and uses it as a device to define key features of many of the characters in the Harry Potter series. One such character is Harry Potter, the orphan wizard, who must overcome his dark past to defeat the primary antagonist, Voldemort. Because of Harry's tragic back story, death becomes a major theme of his life and shapes his character. Throughout the Harry Potter series, Rowling uses the theme of death to characterize Harry as moral, human, and brave.

A defining trait that Harry possesses is his morality, which Rowling reveals through Harry's refusal to kill the man partially responsible for the death of Harry's parents. For instance, in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry stops Sirius and Lupin from murdering Pettigrew by telling them "[he doesn't] reckon [his] dad would've wanted them to become killers-just for [Pettigrew]."[5] Here, Harry recognizes that neither Sirius, Lupin, nor himself has the right to decide whether or not Pettigrew should die, even if Pettigrew framed Sirius for killing thirteen people. Harry also knows that Pettigrew betrayed his parents to Voldemort, which makes Pettigrew partially

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responsible for their deaths, yet Harry still demands that Pettigrew not be killed. Harry's ability to not let himself be ruled by his own prejudice against Pettigrew shows his morality and understanding of the ramifications of murdering another person. However, Harry also acknowledges that he and his father may approve of Sirius and Lupin murdering someone other than Pettigrew, if it is necessary. Although this may seem to show a flaw in Harry's morality, it actually proves that his act of mercy on Pettigrew is based on principles instead of blind faith in humanity. However, standing by his morals also displays Harry's bravery, which is a characteristic that Rowling elaborates on in various scenes.

Rowling uses the theme of death to characterize Harry as courageous, through the manner in which he faces his own death. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Harry is in a duel with Voldemort, and at one point takes shelter behind a tombstone. He has the choice of staying behind the tombstone and hiding from Voldemort, or standing up and fighting even if it seems hopeless. Harry decides that " he [is] going to die trying to defend himself, even if no defense [is] possible." [6] Harry fights even though it means dying, which proves that Harry's willingness to face Voldemort does not stem from an arrogant notion that he could beat Voldemort. Instead, this shows how Harry overcomes his fears and faces the adversity in his life. It is important that Rowling has Harry respond courageously to a threat when the threat is made on his own life, because in any scenario less than the possibility of his own death, Harry's courage would not seem as genuine. Harry stands up and fights even when he believes that he will die, which shows the highest level of courage possible. However, Rowling contrasts

Harry's courage, as shown by his own death, by showing his reactions to the deaths of others.

Rowling uses the deaths of people that Harry loves to humanize him, so as not to make Harry an unattainable or god-like hero. For instance, when Snape kills Dumbledore, Harry's hero and mentor, Harry panics, thinking of how " he could reverse what had happened if he had [Snape and Dumbledore] both together" and that " Dumbledore could not have died." [7] Harry's refusal to believe that Dumbledore died serves to show his compassionate side and makes him appear more human, because denial is a natural reaction to a personal disaster. It is also important that Rowling uses the death of a loved one as Harry's personal disaster because his reaction may be false in any other scenario, but death strips away any pretense or false emotion. Harry did not have any delay of thought in which he could prepare a reaction to Dumbledore's death. His response is portrayed as genuine because of the rapidity with which Rowling transfers from Dumbledore's death to Harry's reaction. Harry is also humanized through his reaction to his godfather Sirius's death. After Bellatrix kills Sirius in front of Harry, Harry is full of so much blind rage, he says that "[he'll] kill her." [8] In this moment, Harry is willing to kill, but it is out of the love he felt for Sirius and the hatred he felt toward Bellatrix for killing Sirius. This further shows how he is not the perfect hero and humanizes him. It is important that Rowling used Sirius' death as a catalyst for Harry's rage because had his character been willing to kill for anything less than the death of a loved one, his morality would have been put into question. However, Rowling had already presented the idea that Harry believes that killing is acceptable in

extreme situations, and Harry's godfather was just murdered by Bellatrix; therefore, Harry's moral status is not tarnished from this fury that he feels towards Bellatrix. Harry's reaction to Sirius' death humanizes him further when he calms down and begins to blame himself for Sirius' death. Harry believes that "it was his fault Sirius had died; it was all his fault"[9]. This self-blame that Harry feels for Sirius' death serves to further humanize him, because it provides a moment of relief for Harry to release his emotions. It is important that this blame Harry feels is an effect of a loved one's death because this is a common feeling for many people. Rowling acknowledges this common experience and uses it to appeal to a large audience by garnering their sympathy for Harry. This effect is also more powerful on a smaller, more concentrated audience of people who have had similar experiences as Harry and therefore become more empathetic towards him and his story. Rowling helps the audience understand Harry's situation, turning Harry into a more relatable and human character.

### Death Corrupts

The ways in which a character approaches death can also reveal his or her negative attributes. Feelings of hatred, malice, and glee can result from encounters with death, and the expression of these feelings through specific characters allows the reader to gain insight into that character's personality. Rowling utilizes this method of characterization to give description to Voldemort, the primary antagonist of the series whose ultimate goal is to conquer death. Throughout the series, Rowling uses the theme of death to characterize the cruel, egotistical, and fearful nature of Voldemort.

A key feature to Voldemort's character is how he is equally ruthless to both allies and enemies in order to take over the world, which Rowling includes to prove his cruelty. While waiting for his power to be restored, Voldemort casually mentions to Harry that "killing Mudbloods doesn't matter to [him] anymore." [10] In the Harry Potter universe, "Mudblood" is a derogatory term for a witch or wizard who does not have magical parents, also known as a muggle-born. For the majority of his teen and young adult life, Voldemort devotes himself to ridding the world of what he considers to be people, namely mudbloods, unworthy of living in a world that he rules. However, he is able to switch his obsession from mudbloods to Harry, because he sees Harry as the biggest obstacle in his quest for power. This cold move to kill a twelve year old boy shows his unrelenting cruelty to anyone who stands in his path. Also, the nonchalant manner in which Voldemort mentions genocide, as if it were a hobby, is one of the first glimpses the reader sees of Voldemort's sociopathic nature. Until now it is never known that Voldemort kills simply for the sake of killing. Rowling also reveals Voldemort's cruel nature by through her description of Voldemort's followers who fail him in a task. For instance, in a fit of rage upon learning that Harry had destroyed another one of his Horcruxes, which are pieces of Voldemort's soul placed in objects to keep him alive, "again and again [Voldemort's] wand fell, and those who were left were slain, all of them, for bringing him this news." [11] Voldemort slaughters the people around him without bias, despite the fact that many of them devote their lives to serving him. This shows how Voldemort puts no value in the lives of others, even when these people are devoted completely to serving him. This act is especially cruel because the people that Voldemort murdered were not completely to blame for Harry

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destroying Voldemort's Horcrux. Voldemort hides the Horcrux inside of Gringott's, the wizarding bank, knowing full well that it is possible to break into a Gringott's vault as he himself broke into a vault six years earlier. This rage was not logical or premeditated and reveals how Voldemort's instinct is to lash out at others around him, not considering whether they are loyal to him or his enemies. Rowling includes this scene in the series because, although it does not advance the plot, it characterizes the violent nature of Voldemort.

Rowling also characterizes Voldemort as egotistical by describing one of Voldemort's primary ambitions as cheating death. When Voldemort begins his conquest of the wizarding world, he names his followers "Death Eaters." [12] Rowling chooses to name Voldemort's followers Death Eaters because this title is symbolic for Voldemort and his quest for power and immortality. This name suggests not only that Voldemort wants to conquer death and become immortal, but also that he increases his strength by killing others. This shows how megalomaniacal Voldemort is because all that matters to him is staying alive by any means necessary. Voldemort's fervor for immortality leads to him mercilessly murdering anyone who stands in his way. Rowling accentuates his obsession with immortality because it sharply contrasts the value that Voldemort holds his own life at versus the lives of others.

Rowling also uses the theme of death to portray Voldemort as cowardly and controlled by his fears. While dueling Dumbledore, Voldemort declares that "there is nothing worse than death." [13] Although it is natural to fear death, it is another thing entirely to insist that death is the worst thing in the world. <https://assignbuster.com/characterization-through-death-in-the-harry-potter-series/>



Voldemort's belief in this assertion reveals the true intentions behind his quest for immortality. Although this ambition is partially driven by his need to dominate others, the major driving force behind Voldemort's determination to live forever is his fear of death. This humanizes Voldemort to the reader, but Rowling ensures that Voldemort is not pitied for his fear through Rowling's description of the extreme measures to which Voldemort traveled to avoid and conquer death. Voldemort becomes obsessed with avoiding death and as a teenager researches possible ways to defeat death. He soon learns about Horcruxes, and determines that " he would be prepared to murder many times, rip his soul repeatedly, so as to store it in many, separately concealed Horcruxes." [14] This is significant because it shows the lengths to which Voldemort goes to keep himself alive. He willingly splits his soul into seven pieces, and unintentionally made an eighth piece, just to make it more difficult for him to die. These acts violate the laws of nature, and as a result, Voldemort lost much of his humanity, although he did not have much to start with, by splitting his soul into different pieces. Voldemort is willing to sacrifice all of this to hide from his fears. Also, a part of the process of creating a Horcrux is to murder someone. This further exemplifies the lengths to which Voldemort goes to in order to avoid death.

### Harry Versus Voldemort

Throughout the Harry Potter series, Rowling uses character interactions with death to characterize Harry and Voldemort separately. Harry is characterized as virtuous and human, while Voldemort is characterized as cruel and alien. However, it is also possible to gain insight into a character by analyzing how the characters react differently in similar situations. Rowling employs <https://assignbuster.com/characterization-through-death-in-the-harry-potter-series/>

character contrasting to describe Harry and Voldemort as good and evil, respectively.

The first area in which Rowling contrasts Harry and Voldemort is how each character approaches his own death. After realizing that the only way that his friends can survive is to sacrifice himself, Harry faces Voldemort and does not defend himself, allowing Voldemort to kill him. Although Harry fears death, he goes to it willingly if it means that doing so will save the people he loves, which shows his bravery and selflessness. However, Voldemort has never loved anything enough to sacrifice himself for it. In fact, the only person that Voldemort loves is himself, which causes him to have the reverse reaction to Harry when it comes to his own death. Whereas Harry would lay down his life to save others, Voldemort does the opposite by killing others to preserve his own life. Rowling uses both Harry and Voldemort's fates to further assert that Harry's reaction to his own death is virtuous while Voldemort's reaction is selfish. Harry inadvertently destroys another piece of Voldemort's soul and is able to come back to life and defeat Voldemort. Voldemort's obsession with avoiding his own death ultimately leads to his own spell rebounding and killing him, which occurs years before he would have died had he just led a normal life and not made any Horcruxes.

Harry and Voldemort are both contrasted in their fears of death. Harry does fear death, but it is the deaths of his friends and loved ones that he fears, whereas Voldemort only fears for his own death. Because both characters fear death, Harry and Voldemort initially appear to have a similar characteristic. However, it is proven through the book series that it is how a person reacts to their fears that matters. Harry reacts to his fear of his

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friends dying by sacrificing himself, which shows his morality. However, Voldemort allows his fear of his own death to rule his life, and he reacts to it by killing others, both to create the Horcruxes which Voldemort believes would make him invincible and to eliminate any adversaries or allies who get in his way. This shows Voldemort's selfishness and weakness of will, as he cannot control his fear. The sharpness of the contrast between Harry's willingness to die and Voldemort's determination to become immortal strengthens the characterization of each person more than if they were both characterized separately.

Rowling also characterizes Harry and Voldemort differently by showing how Harry accepts that there are fates worse than death and Voldemort cannot conceive this idea. Rowling uses Harry's ability to understand the pain of others as a device to characterize him as compassionate. Throughout his life, Harry sees the pain and suffering of other people, and from these experiences, learns that death is not the worst thing to experience. Harry sees how his friend Neville's parents who were once brilliant Aurors, a part of the wizarding law enforcement, were tortured to the point of insanity by four of Voldemort's followers and are living permanently in St. Mungo's Hospital, where they are visited by Neville who they hardly recognize. This insight into Neville's life matures Harry as he sees that although Neville's parents are not dead like Harry's, Neville is affected by his parents' mental instability just as much as Harry is affected by his parents' deaths. Harry realizes that every time Neville sees his parents he is reminded of their torture, whereas Harry has little to no memory of his parents. Rowling contrasts this compassionate characterization of Harry by using Voldemort's belief that death is the worst

fate to characterize him as ignorant. In Voldemort's many attempts to preserve his life, he often experiences situations that could be considered worse than death. Voldemort forced a lonely life on himself by turning any person that could be his friend into a follower, who he may kill on a whim, as well as killing all of his remaining family members. Voldemort also purposefully disfigured himself, both physically and spiritually, to stay alive. He lived on the body of Quirrell, the professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts during Harry's first year at Hogwarts, like a parasite in an attempt to recover the sorcerer's stone, which grants immortality. When Quirrell's body was destroyed, Voldemort possessed the bodies of different animals, mainly snakes, until he created a crude body to inhabit. He lived in a state of extreme discomfort, if not pain, for extended periods of time just in the hope of returning to a normal body, something many people would consider against the laws of nature and not worth the pain. Voldemort also mentally disfigures himself when he purposefully split his soul into seven pieces as backups in case his body is destroyed. Because the use of Horcruxes is so rare, little was known about their psychological effects when Voldemort first asked Professor Slughorn about them, and yet Voldemort made the Horcruxes anyways. This is a sign that Voldemort was willing to sacrifice his mental stability to stay alive, which contrasts Harry's understanding of the tragedy of Neville's parents. Whereas Harry accepted that their insanity is worse than death, Voldemort would embrace insanity to avoid death.

In the end, Harry understands and respects the finality of death, whereas Voldemort repeatedly breaches this natural order through the creation of Horcruxes, the objects that hold pieces of a soul, and Inperi, corpses brought

back to life to do the bidding of a dark wizard. To show this, Rowling has Harry take the Resurrection Stone, which is a stone that allows its user to see and talk to people they know who have died, and is able to use it successfully, where he finds comfort in the words of his parents and friends while not believing that they can be brought back. Many people had used the Stone before him but went insane because they believed that the people could be brought back from the dead. Harry accepted that this is not possible and uses the Stone for a better purpose, showing his maturity of mind. Rowling further showed this acceptance by using the scene above when Harry was on the way to sacrificing himself to save his friends. Rowling then contrasts this with Voldemort's actions, bringing dead bodies back to life and splitting his soul in pieces, to characterize Voldemort as conceited, where the only person that matters is himself.

## Conclusion

Rowling uses the theme of death to reveal multiple characteristics about Harry and Voldemort as well as show the differences between the two characters. Characteristics such as courage, cowardice, wisdom, and ignorance are shown through multiple uses of the theme of death. Rowling used not only Harry and Voldemort's deaths to characterize each person, but also their reactions to the deaths of others and each character's beliefs about death as a part of life. Rowling's use of these various characteristics and methods of characterization allows for each characteristic to be defined in a unique way. Although the question of to what extent Rowling uses the theme of death to characterize Harry and Voldemort has been answered, new questions have arisen from this analysis: What other themes has <https://assignbuster.com/characterization-through-death-in-the-harry-potter-series/>

Rowling used to characterize different characters, is characterization the primary purpose of the repetition of death in the Harry Potter series, and what other characters has Rowling characterized using the theme of death?