

THE WORLD ISN'T SPLIT INTO GOOD PEOPLE AND DEATH EATERS: EXPLORING  
THE AMBIGUITIES OF ALCHEMY, IMMORTALITY, MORALITY, AND CHOICE IN J.K.  
ROWLING'S HARRY POTTER SERIES

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Victoria Lynn Fossum

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**Title**

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EATERS: EXPLORING THE AMBIGUITIES OF ALCHEMY,  
IMMORTALITY, MORALITY, AND CHOICE IN J.K. ROWLING'S  
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Victoria Lynn Fossum

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The Supervisory Committee certifies that this *disquisition* complies with North Dakota State  
University's regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS**

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Dr. Verena Theile

---

Chair

Dr. Alison Graham-Bertolini

---

Dr. Jennifer Momsen

---

Approved:

May 12, 2015

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Date

Dr. Gary Totten

---

Department Chair

## ABSTRACT

In this Master's paper, I am exploring the ambiguous intersection between alchemy and immortality in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, especially where choice and morality complicate Rowling's depiction of the means to immortality and those who seek, or choose not to seek, it. Rowling's series seems to suggest that the quest for immortality is destructive, but there are also instances of successful alchemical practices within *Potter*. My focus will be on the means to immortality Rowling introduces, as well as the way in which Rowling portrays the moral implications of choosing to pursue immortality when the ambiguities of alchemical practices and receptions are considered alongside Rowling's series. I argue that Rowling suggests that there is only ambiguity in the search for immortality, and that means the products of the search for immortality are also ambiguous, as is the morality of choosing the pursuit.

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## INTRODUCTION: ALCHEMY AND CHOICE

*From the tip of his wand burst the silver doe: She landed on the office floor, bounded once across the office, and soared out of the window. Dumbledore watched her fly away, and as her silvery glow faded he turned back to Snape, and his eyes were full of tears. "After all this time?"*

*"Always," said Snape. —Deathly Hallows 687*

In fourteenth century France, a moneylender experimenting with alchemy discovered a text known as the Book of Abraham. It took the alchemist weeks to translate the book, which had been written in a complicated code. But, once the task was accomplished, he found that it held the secret to creating the Philosopher's Stone, the highly coveted object that could transmute base metals into gold and allow one to brew the Elixir of Life, making the imbiber immortal. This is the tale of Nicholas Flamel, an alchemist of the fourteenth century rumored to be the only discoverer of the secret to immortality.

Alchemists were incredibly secretive about their practices. In *Alchemy, The Philosopher's Stone*, Alison Coudert explains that part of this secrecy stemmed from fear of church and state intervention. Alchemy, as a science that combined notions of philosophy with aspects of the occult, was controversial. While European courts employed many alchemists, others, who were out of favor, were hanged for treason and heresy. Imprisonment and excommunication were dangers that alchemists faced, but they also obscured their texts and practices in order to hide them from other alchemists, or because alchemical terms had drastically changed over the centuries. "So much did this happen," Coudert claims, "that it was difficult for alchemists to determine the exact significance of any given term" (69.) Thus was the practice of alchemy so secretive and ambiguous<sup>1</sup> that often alchemists themselves were unable to

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<sup>1</sup> Morally questionable, as well as non-specific

understand its terms and formulas. Secrecy was also imperative in keeping ideas and concepts that were controversial hidden from society, and from the discovery of other alchemists. The most illusive of these is the Philosopher's Stone.

Discovering the secret to and successfully creating the Philosopher's Stone is one of the main goals of alchemy. Coudert elaborates that "the alchemical dream of transmuting base metal into gold was more than a scheme to get rich quick; it was a dream in which death could play no part" (194). Coudert considers the fear of death the driving force for alchemical discovery. With the Stone, alchemists can claim immortality and quell the fear of death. However, even the creation of the Stone was ambiguous, with some accounts listing one step in the process, and some listing ten or twelve (Coudert 43). The creation of the Stone, like the secrecy of alchemists, made the quest for immortality an ambiguous endeavor. This ambiguous quest for immortality is revealed in incarnations of the Flamel legend, including the one retold and re-envisioned in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. In the world Rowling creates, immortality is entirely possible, even plausible. Because of its plausibility, the decision to seek immortality is much more complicated than merely having access to it. Rowling explores the intersection between the choice to seek immortality and the morality of those who do.

John Granger describes choices as "the human ability to decide between two options" and says that "if this faculty is well trained, a person is able to discriminate or choose well between options of good and evil, right and wrong, advantage and disadvantage. In each of the Harry Potter stories, we're able to see just what constitutes 'good choosing'" (71). Good or bad choices, as demonstrated by each character involved in the quest for immortality, are the foundation for all conflict in *Potter*. Rowling exposes the first of these conflicts in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* when she introduces Nicholas Flamel, the alchemist and alleged

discoverer of the Sorcerer's Stone. In Rowling's revision of the legend, Flamel is a wizard who, like the successful alchemist of lore, discovered the Sorcerer's Stone and learned how to brew the Elixir of Life, thus acquiring the secret to immortality. Rowling's Flamel lives more than six hundred years after the historical Nicholas Flamel's death, inhabiting the modern age in which Rowling begins Harry Potter's story. Rowling rewrites the Flamel legend to fit into the world of wizardry she creates in *Potter*. It is telling that Rowling would introduce alchemy as a means to immortality because, like her portrayal of the quest for immortality, alchemy was regarded as an ambiguous endeavor in pre-modern Europe. Alchemists often practiced secretly, though some were employed by court monarchs, like John Dee, while others were accused of heresy and treason and either imprisoned or hanged, like Edward Kelley, a contemporary of Dee's who was imprisoned in Prague and killed while trying to escape (Holmyard 205-8).). Alchemy is the tool with which Rowling initially introduces, and alchemy continues to inform Rowling's narrative as Potter's story unfolds. With alchemy as her foundation, Rowling creates a text that relies not only on choice to expose morality, but also relies on the idea that a person can make morally ambiguous choices that leave us uncertain, complicating her text and choices of the characters within it.

Using Flamel's storyline to introduce the concept of ambiguous immortality to her readers, Rowling pits Voldemort against Harry and Dumbledore in the race to acquire the Stone. In Rowling's retelling, Flamel's discovery of the Stone allows him to keep brewing the Elixir so he may live forever. However, when it becomes apparent that Voldemort pursues the Stone to extend his life indefinitely and rise to power, Dumbledore convinces Flamel to relinquish the Stone so it can be first be hidden and then destroyed. As Margaret J. Oakes states "Rowling's version of Flamel does not subscribe to a view of magic that includes principles of mystery and



exclusivity in Muggle alchemy; he is merely a wizard who specialized in a particular area of magic, and his friendship with Dumbledore attests to a shared philosophy about the open nature and democratic uses of magic” (147). What Oakes statement reveals is that Flamel is not necessarily as ambiguous and secretive as the alchemists of pre-modern Europe. However, his is an ambiguous character. Oakes informs us that Rowling’s Flamel is democratic. As a contemporary of Dumbledore, we are to understand that he is not an evil character. However, he is also not necessarily a good character, as he has kept the Stone secret from the rest of the wizarding world, using it exclusively for his own and his wife’s benefit. Flamel’s moral ambiguity allows him to make choices that define him as a good or evil character—or as a continually ambiguous figure. Rowling’s ambiguous characterization of Flamel reminds her readers that pre-modern alchemists were often as mysterious as their practices, ambiguously creating and coding texts and formulas. Their secrecy was only amplified by the ambiguity of alchemy itself: a practice that is a combination of science and magic, mixing aspects of philosophy, chemistry, and occultism.

In the end, Flamel sacrifices his own immortality to prevent Voldemort’s rise to power, choosing to die for a greater purpose rather than go on living forever. This choice allows Harry and his friends to stop Voldemort from using the Stone to gain immortality and use his power to destroy the wizarding world. It is telling that Dumbledore reminds us “to Nicholas and Perenelle, it really is like going to bed after a very, *very* long day” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 297), because this once more highlights the moral ambiguity of Flamel’s character and the profession of alchemy in general. Flamel’s sacrifice isn’t so much *good* as it is *not evil*. It reflects the character’s recognition that death is a part of life, rather than its opposite. The story of Flamel thus functions as a metaphor for the morally ambiguous search for immortality. He makes a decision that

initially seems sacrificial, even morally righteous, but, when considering Flamel's relation to the secrecy of alchemy, Flamel's morality is more ambiguous than it appears. He sacrifices his immortality for the good of the wizarding world, but, as Dumbledore explains, it is not necessarily a sacrifice when considering the long life he lived. Rowling creates Flamel as a representation of the ambiguity of alchemy, and this he remains a morally ambiguous character.

When Rowling introduces the Sorcerer's Stone in the first installment of the series, she foregrounds the practice of alchemy as morally ambiguous, and in the final installment, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, she concludes with another morally ambiguous figure that struggles with choosing immortality. Severus Snape's story mirrors the kind of morally ambiguous sacrifice Flamel makes in giving up the Sorcerer's Stone. Like Flamel, Snape is cast as morally ambiguous. Unlike Flamel, Snape is driven not by a desire to protect the wizarding world, but by the love he feels for Lily Potter. When Snape chooses to break his alliance with Lord Voldemort after hearing of Lily Potter's death, he sacrifices the power and immortality that Voldemort can provide to avenge the wrongful death of the person he loves most. This choice eventually leads to Snape's death, but his sacrifice also leads to Voldemort's defeat. Like Flamel, he dies as part of the effort to protect the wizarding world from Voldemort. Not only does he make this sacrifice with no regard for what he can gain, he also does so knowing that when he is caught, he will most surely die.

Rowling confuses our understanding of Snape's character to emphasize his ambiguity. In *Sorcerer's Stone*, we are introduced to the mean Professor Snape, who has a grudge against Harry because of his father. This escalates in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, when Snape attempts to teach Harry Occlumency and becomes so upset at Harry's resistance that he exposes his own memories of Harry's father, who bullied Snape throughout their school years.

Finally, in *Half-Blood Prince*, Snape murders Dumbledore in apparent service of Voldemort. It is only in the final pages of the series that we learn Snape is not completely evil, and that his characterization is more complicated, more ambiguous, than we had been lead to believe. Throughout the series, Rowling has forced her readers to understand as mean, vindictive, and evil. However, as Veronica L. Schanoes is correct to point out, in Rowling's characterization of Snape, Rowling "forces her reader to distinguish between nastiness and wickedness, between subjective hatred and objective evil" (132). "Snape is, at heart, mean-spirited" Schanoes reinforces, "his being on the side of the angels is a distinct choice, one that he consistently makes despite loathing his allies" (134). Snape makes a choice to be on Dumbledore's side, rather than Voldemort's, and though this choice alone does not make him an entirely good character, he is clearly *against evil*, at least (or especially) the evil represented by Voldemort.

Through her depiction of the multiple means to immortality, which further underline the ambiguous nature of immortality and alchemy, and the morality of choice, Rowling suggests that the quest for immortality is neither good nor evil, but a morally ambiguous pursuit. In this master's paper, I argue that by introducing choice and the pursuit of immortality as central themes in *Potter*, with pre-modern alchemy as her foundation, Rowling complicates concepts of morality that, on the surface, seem relatively simple. Using new historicism, I explore the ambiguities in Rowling's depictions of these crucial decisions surrounding immortality and their connections to historical alchemists. In *Practicing New Historicism*, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt claim that new historicism involves "the discovery of unexpected discursive contexts for literary works by pursuing their 'supplements' rather than their overt thematics" (17), which is a technique I attempt to employ in exploring the historical accounts of Flamel and of alchemy, as well as literary representations of pre-modern alchemists. Gallagher and

Greenblatt also emphasize that part of new historicism is “fascinated by the ways in which certain texts come to possess some limited immunity from the policing functions of their society, how they lay claim to special status, and how they contrive to move from one time period to another without losing all meaning” (17). For instance, the historical account of Flamel’s discovery of the Stone, according to Coudert, was not called into question until centuries after his death and the books attributed to him were forgeries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (15-6). Rowling is able to revise the Flamel legend, then, because of its persistence into our own time period.

Through her use of alchemy and immortality, Rowling compels her readers to see the ambiguities in choice: to see choice as not inherently suggestive of good or evil, right or wrong. To do this, Rowling creates characters with the agency to choose their own paths, thus making them morally righteous, morally reprehensible, or, like Flamel and Snape, morally ambiguous. After all, Flamel chooses to give up his immortal life for the benefit of entire wizarding world, but at no real sacrifice to himself. Snape chooses to protect Harry only because he loved Harry’s mother, and not out of some morally righteous need to save the world from Voldemort. Both the pursuit of immortality and the characters that are involved in the pursuit are morally ambiguous until their choices make them who they are, but even then, they can remain utterly unclear.

## THE SORCERER'S STONE

*You know, the Stone was really not such a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all—the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them.—Dumbledore, Sorcerer's Stone 297*

For alchemists, choosing to seek out immortality through the Stone was an obvious endeavor. Yet, as Dumbledore reminds us, we tend to choose things that are bad for us, and the Stone may be one of those very things. That Rowling introduces the Sorcerer's Stone as the first means to immortality signals the ambiguity of immortality, especially when considering the creation of the object was not completely understood by pre-modern alchemists or acknowledged by Rowling. Rowling merely claims that the Stone is real, and that Flamel is in possession of it. The Stone, the simplest of the three means to immortality that Rowling provides, consists of only one device, the Stone itself. Apparently, the method to achieve immortality, the Elixir of Life, is a potion that—while almost completely unknown to the magical community—is relatively simple to brew, unlike the process on which pre-modern alchemists could not agree for creating the Stone. Rowling's Sorcerer's Stone's powers, like those of the Philosopher's Stone of alchemical legend, allow the possessor to create gold out of base metals like lead, as well as brew the Elixir of Life, allowing someone to live forever. Rowling begins the series with this introduction to alchemy to suggest that any decision involving immortality can lead to ambiguity. Rowling writes about the Stone as if all it takes to become immortal is to choose to create the Stone. However, as Rowling reveals more of Flamel's character, that understanding becomes less clear. Rowling's depictions of the Stone and of Flamel complicate our

understanding of immortality and choice, suggesting that there is more ambiguity in choosing immortality than there appears.

When Harry visits Gringotts with Hagrid, he is suspicious about a vault that Hagrid visits on an errand for Dumbledore. Vault 713 is kept under lock and key, and after the Daily Prophet reports a break-in at the bank the same day that Harry and Hagrid visit, he is even more suspicious. After confronting Hagrid multiple times, Hagrid lets slip that the vault has something to do with Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel. This again harkens back to the notion of alchemical secrecy, in which safeguarding the secret of the Stone was a top priority. “Alchemy was an arcane art,” Lauren Kassell explains. “Its traditions were learned through divine inspiration, instruction by a master under an oath of secrecy, and the study of esoteric texts. These texts encoded the procedures to make the philosophers’ stone. In prose and verse, paradoxes, digressions, erroneous quantities, numerical encodings, metaphors and allegories concealed secrets from the uninitiated reader. Some works bore the name of a mythical or pseudonymous author and warnings to keep them hidden” (61-2). Alchemists, like Dumbledore, took extreme measures to protect their secrets, most importantly that of the Stone.

In the novel, information about Flamel is also hard to discover. For Harry, Flamel becomes so difficult to find that it is almost as if he were dead. In fact, Flamel is a complete mystery to Harry, Ron, and Hermione at the start of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. When Harry tells Ron and Hermione about Flamel, the three begin to research him, but cannot find any books about his life or work. After weeks of searching, Harry finally realizes that there is mention of Flamel on Dumbledore’s chocolate fog card, stating that two were alchemical partners. Then, Hermione finds one piece of information on Flamel and they finally discover mention of the alchemist in a book she checks out of the library on a whim. The book claims that

Flamel is “the only known maker of the Sorcerer’s Stone,” and that Flamel is six hundred sixty-six years old, living in Devon with his wife Perenelle who is six hundred fifty-eight (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 219-20). The reclusive life of Flamel and his wife suggests that, though Flamel has been using his Stone to gain immortality, he has not been actively involved in any activities that would suggest he has riches or immortality. His isolation and seclusion highlights his moral neutrality. In fact, he has lived a life so quiet and ordinary that there is virtually no record of his immortality, other than the small mention Hermione finds. The moral neutrality of Flamel’s immortality is further proof that the decision to be immortal is not inherently good or evil. It is merely a path one chooses. Again, Rowling is suggesting that it is not the pursuit of immortality that makes one morally righteous or reprehensible, it is the way one chooses to use immortality.

The historical account of Flamel’s life is surrounded in stories that have been reimagined over time, so much so that it is difficult to tell which parts of Flamel’s life are truth and which are fiction. Legend has it that Flamel was a moneylender in fourteenth century France, who did indeed dabble in alchemy (Coudert 15). However, the rest of his life seems to be shrouded in mystery. It is said that he discovered a book of alchemical engravings known as the *Book of Abraham*. According to E.J. Holmyard, Flamel translated the text to discover the secret to creating the Stone, which could be utilized to transmute base metals into gold, as well as brew the Elixir of Life, which would make the imbiber immortal (242-3). After many experiments, Flamel, with the help of his wife Perenelle, successfully transmuted mercury into gold, becoming one of the richest men in all of Paris. Flamel, along with other practicing alchemists of the time, was pushed to the political forefront as royal courts began employing their own alchemists to practice the art in service of the monarchy. According to John Read’s “Alchemy and Alchemists” the court alchemists were in constant danger of being tortured or hanged if an

experiment proved unsuccessful or “imprudent” (271). Read’s use of the word “imprudent” signals the moral ambiguity of alchemists during the time period, as it suggests the practice of alchemy was sometimes misguided. Historian Peter Marshall claims that, in a version of Flamel’s story, Flamel was so troubled by the political interest in alchemy that he feigned his death and fled to Switzerland, using the Elixir to live for hundreds of years in secrecy (313-5). Allison Coudert’s more contemporary text does not agree with Holmyard’s, Read’s, and Marshall’s assessments of Flamel’s living situation at the time, claiming instead that the Flamels probably grew wealthy enough to retire outside Paris, merely fading out of popularity in alchemical circles, and thus becoming the legend we know today. Rowling attaches to the mystery and ambiguity of the Flamel legend, focusing on his discovery of the Stone as his major achievement.

Though the account of Flamel’s life as a successful alchemist has been exaggerated, the story of Flamel’s success in creating the Elixir of Life persisted for centuries after his death. Marshall hypothesizes that the story of the Flamels could be a tool of the alchemical community to convince skeptics that alchemy can be successful as well as ambiguous. Even their names seem alchemical in origin, with the name Flamel suggesting “flame” and Perenelle Flamel suggesting “perennial flame” as well as Perenelle’s maiden name, Perrier, suggesting “pierre” meaning stone. “Taken together,” Marshall suggests, “Flamel and Perenelle would seem to evoke ‘*flame*’ and ‘*pierre*’, fire and stone, the means and goal of alchemy” (315). Thus, the Flamels embody alchemy, and in so doing suggest that not only does alchemy make immortality possible, but alchemy as a practice is also potentially immortal. However, this, too, is an ambiguous idea. After all, neither the Flamels nor the practice of alchemy achieved immortality, yet they are notions we still remember. In the same way in that the story of Flamel may have



served as a historical metaphor for the moral ambiguity of alchemy and immortality, Rowling's rewriting of the Flamels does the same for *Potter*. The legend of Flamel is surrounded in vague mentions of his riches and ambiguous accounts of his alchemical practices. Thus, Flamel is the perfect character for Rowling to use in order

to introduce increasingly complex and ambiguous concepts of morality and immortality into her series.

The truth of Flamel as an alchemist is already ambiguous, thus making his story one that can be easily molded to suit Rowling's purpose. This ambiguity also allows Rowling to juxtapose Flamel with the ambiguous nature of morality that goes along with the decision to pursue immortality. Flamel's immortality, after all, does not harm anyone. This ambiguous moral state is emphasized when Hermione discovers the only information about Flamel she can find in the Hogwarts library. He is so ambiguous as an immortal that there is virtually no mention of him, almost as if he *is* dead. Again, this suggests that it is how the characters choose to use their immortality that makes the good or evil, and the pursuit of immortality itself is morally ambiguous. Rowling's Nicholas Flamel seems to understand the corrupted power that immortality can lead to, and it seems that this is reason he keeps his secret hidden away for so long, revealing the Stone only when it becomes clear that he cannot hide the secret of immortality from Voldemort. The accounts of the historical Flamel also seem preoccupied with the power immortality implies, and Flamel's attempts to hide himself away from those who sought the Stone might signal that he recognized how easily the choice to pursue immortality can become corrupt by those who seek it.

The battle between Voldemort and Harry in *Sorcerer's Stone* is the foundation for most of the conflict in *Potter*, and at the heart of this conflict is the desire for the Stone. Harry, Ron,

and Hermione have to face a series of challenges to get to the vault where the Stone is held. The last of these is a series of potions with a riddle that allows the guesser to choose the correct potion to move through a wall of flame and into the vault. There are also poisons among the potions, though, and logic and choice become muddled in this challenge. Hermione, who is helping Harry to choose the correct potion, remarks “this is isn’t magic—it’s logic [...] A lot of the greatest wizards haven’t got an ounce of logic. They’d be stuck in here forever” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 285). Hermione’s comment points out some very interesting things about the potion riddle. First, she recognizes that a choice must be made, and it cannot be made through magical means. Secondly, Hermione claims that a wizard unable to use logic to solve the riddle would be stuck in the vault forever. This presupposes that a wizard, trapped in a room for a long period of time, would not simply drink one of the potions to end the riddle. Yet, the nature of the riddle *forces* the subject to make a choice to solve the riddle by drinking the correct potion, guess and choose incorrectly, or stay forever outside the vault, choosing to not choose between the potions. The riddles, too, are connected to alchemical practices and the notion of secrecy. Riddles and symbols allowed alchemists to encode their texts and keep them secret from one other. They also used riddles to teach and train alchemical apprentices. Hermione recognizes that the riddles are reliant on magic but logic, just as alchemists trained their students to understand the philosophies of alchemy along with alchemical practices (Coudert 72). Thus, this riddle suggests that there is ambiguity in the choice of potions: one can choose to *not* choose, but one must understand the philosophy and logic of not choosing. This riddle also foreshadows the final choice Harry makes in the whole of the series, as he meets Dumbledore in the limbo of King’s Cross Station, faced with the choice to live, die, or stay in limbo with Dumbledore. Again, Rowling emphasizes ambiguity of choice, and Harry’s decision to drink the potion Hermione tells him to outside the

vault, and to leave limbo to live and continue to fight Voldemort, suggests he is a morally righteous character.

Harry's battle with Voldemort regarding the Stone is indicative of the ambiguity of choice with regards to the Stone. When Harry arrives in the vault in front of the Mirror of Erised to discover Quirrell is also there, he quickly realizes the mirror is the key to finding the Stone before Quirrell and Voldemort are able to retrieve it. Harry looks into the Mirror, and as he does, the Stone falls into his pocket. It is his desire to prevent Voldemort from acquiring the Stone that allows him to find it. Desire and choice are ambiguously intertwined here, and Dumbledore explains, "only one who wanted to find the Stone—find it, but not us it—would be able to get it" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 300). Janet Brennan Croft suggests that the "puzzle reveals something important about human nature," (148). Namely, that desire is most often selfish. However, it also reveals that we can choose to change our desire, and we can choose to desire selflessly. If Harry had the desire to use the Stone for his own means, or if he chose not to look into the Mirror, or, for that matter, if he had chosen a different potion to enter the vault, he would not have been able to keep the Stone from Voldemort. Instead, Harry desires the Stone selflessly and, because he has already made a choice about *why* he desires it, he is able to acquire it.

Before this moment, desire is a harmful state for Harry. When he first discovers the Mirror, Dumbledore warns him "men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 213). Jerry L. Walls boils down Dumbledore's message from the epitaph about humans choosing wrong into a simple statement about human desire. "We don't just have a knack for *choosing* the wrong things," Walls claims, "but for *wanting* the wrong things" (65). Nicholas Sheltrown recognizes the significance of the Mirror as a self-reflective object. "By revealing the

deepest desires of one's heart," Sheltroun says, "the Mirror gives tremendous insight into the viewer's identity and character" (52). However, Sheltroun also recognizes the danger an object like the Mirror of Erised can pose. He uses Dumbledore's warning about the Mirror to suggest that the viewer's true desire cannot only entrance the viewer to spend an entire life in front of the Mirror, but also lead to an obsession that can be morally corrupting, causing the viewer to become so obsessed with the Mirror that all other responsibilities would become unimportant (52-3). Sean E. Klein discusses the harmful effects of choosing our own desires over the well being of others, but he also notes that there is a benefit to knowing our desires. Klein states, "While our lives shouldn't be spent just in desire-satisfaction—as the Mirror of Erised illustrates for us—we do have desires that are worthwhile to pursue and satisfy" (103), like Harry's desire to acquire the Stone in order to keep it away from Voldemort.

What Rowling emphasizes in this part of the series is that having control over our desires, the way Harry does, or choosing to desire the protection of others above ourselves, is how we avoid the corruption that can come from singularly following our own desires. Rowling reminds us that desire is an ambiguous pursuit, because even Harry follows his desires—he just seems to have control of them. This notion is also represented in the historical context of alchemy, in which many alchemists, desiring to discover the secret to creating the Stone, produced fraudulent stories of success. One such fraud, Frederick Böttger, performed faked transmutations that landed him in a Prussian prison (Morris 14-9). But, most often, Harry's desires help him make choices, whereas Voldemort's desires corrupted his ability to make decisions. Vanessa Compagnone reminds us "it is only someone who is selfless who will be able to work out the real puzzle of the mirror" (149), emphasizing not only the danger the mirror creates, but also the morality of the selfless choice Harry must make to choose to possess the Stone to defeat

Voldemort, rather than for the riches and immortality it can offer him. Luckily, choice is the morally defining factor in Harry's interactions with Voldemort and the Mirror.

## HORCRUXES

*Killing rips the soul apart. The wizard intent upon creating a Horcrux would use the damage to his advantage: He would encase the torn portion—Slughorn, Half-Blood Prince 498*

Rowling provides one obviously sinister path to immortality that requires murder in order to achieve it in order to emphasize the power of choice in terms of immortality. In choosing to become immortal through use of horcruxes, one chooses a morally reprehensible means to immortality. Thus, Rowling removes ambiguity from this choice of immortal instrument, creating a clearly evil means to immortality. Unlike the Sorcerer's Stone, horcruxes have no historical equivalent that I could discover. These devices, in which a wizard hides a piece of his soul, are incredibly more complex and ambiguous than Rowling's Sorcerer's Stone. The Stone is a straightforward object that uses simple means, a mere potion, to achieve immortality. Horcruxes, on the other hand, require an act of murder and a spell that no one seems to have any knowledge of, partially because horcruxes are dark magic and therefore a forbidden subject at Hogwarts, and partially because they are rare due to the extreme act of evil they require. From the beginning of Rowling's *Potter* series it is clear that Lord Voldemort is the ultimate representation of the negative moral effects of choice. Voldemort, as the murderer of Harry's parents, is the story's greatest villain, and his pursuit of immortality and magical power puts Harry in danger constantly. He corrupts his moral ambiguity through his decision to pursue the darkest means to immortality, intentionally creating six horcruxes (unintentionally creating seven, implanting a piece of his soul in Harry) by splitting his soul into seven pieces and pursuing power selfishly and without remorse.

Rowling, through Voldemort, seems to offer us one example of unambiguous evil in *Potter*. "It is clear from the stories that both Voldemort and Harry are responsible for their own

moral characters,” says Jennifer Hart Weed. “Their actions and their choices determine the kinds of people that they become. Voldemort’s choices lead to his own ruin and suffering as well as the suffering of others” (157). Voldemort’s choices do led to his eventual destruction, but Rowling reveals that Voldemort’s relationship with magic has not always been as volatile as it becomes in his later life. Rowling emphasizes that Voldemort made significant choices that lead to his corruption. The first thing Harry learns about Harry is that he is evil, but not that he was born evil. Indeed, even in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, Hagrid marks Voldemort as “a wizard who went bad” (54), revealing the ambiguity of Voldemort’s nature, always with the potential to choose to change. David and Catherine Deavel point out that “One of the scariest aspects of Rowling’s view of evil is that people can and do choose it. They choose the lie of evil rather than the truth of goodness” (142).

Voldemort does choose evil, over and over again. And it turns him into a morally reprehensible character. Weed describes Voldemort’s choice as animalistic. Voldemort sees only power and his choice to pursue it corrupts his judgment. Weed enforces this claim when she explains that Voldemort “does not recognize the humanity and the worth of those around him; all he sees are obstacles on his own path to power” (153). Weed points out that Voldemort’s choices emphasize his ambiguity as an evil character. He becomes unable to tell right from wrong “just like an animal” (153). Indeed, when he beings to make his horcruxes Voldemort’s appearance beings to change, showing outwardly the evil that he has done in order to gain immortality. By the time he has made the last of his horcruxes, implanting a final piece of his soul into his snake Nagini, he, too, resembles a snake. This imagery is not mere coincidence, as it harkens back to Biblical images of Satan in Eden. Lavoie sees the Biblical image of Satan in Voldemort’s appearance, and she connects his appearance to his creation of his horcruxes and his quest for

immortality when she notices, “Voldemort’s eyes have become snake-like slits, [...] because the eyes are the windows to the soul, and Voldemort has severed his soul into parts” (82). Thus, Voldemort not only comes to represent evil, but he becomes the physical embodiment of his morally reprehensible choices.

Rowling’s use of snake imagery connects Voldemort to historical alchemists themselves. “The serpent is another image for the alchemist,” Coudert claims, it is a symbol of alchemical destruction of base in order to discover the secret to immortality (99). In this way, Voldemort, too, is a symbol of the destruction baseness. He attempts to destroy any part of himself that is not linked to his magical abilities. In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, unveiling Voldemort’s past is an important part of Dumbledore’s lessons with Harry. Dumbledore begins to show Harry a collection of memories in order to reveal his lineage, introduction to magic, and growing obsession with magical objects and artifacts. Thus, Rowling introduces us to Tom Riddle, and, unlike the Voldemort we know, Riddle is an ambiguous figure. His father was Tom Riddle Sr., a Muggle of high social class. His mother was Merope Gaunt, a pureblood witch and descendant of Salazar Slytherin. The memory reveals that Marvolo and Morfin Gaunt attacked Riddle and were sent to Azkaban. Dumbledore then speculates that Merope drugged Tom Riddle Sr. with love potion, married him, became pregnant, and revealed the truth to her husband. Tom Sr. abandoned Merope after learning he’d been tricked into marrying her, leaving her to give birth to Tom in an orphanage where she dies shortly after. The memory reveals two important items that were once possessed by Riddle’s family: the ring, which contains the Resurrection Stone that can bring loved ones back from the dead, and the necklace of Salazar Slytherin. Both objects become two of Riddle’s first horcruxes, and their connection to Riddle’s family is a crucial part of understanding his choices to continually pursue immortality and power, as it



erases the ambiguity of his heritage. Riddle's disgust at his half-blood nature and loathing towards his father lead him to disconnect from familial relations, and this distancing allows him to make a new identity for himself. Riddle begins to exist ambiguously, outside of relationships to anyone.

It is clear that at sixteen, Tom Riddle forsakes his connection to his father, understanding that it provides him no power. However, he also destroys any potential for a connection to his maternal uncle, framing him for the triple murder and insuring his lifelong imprisonment. Considering he has searched his lifetime for answers about his lineage, it is interesting that Voldemort throws away any familial connection he would have to the Gaunts, and therefore to Slytherin. Though this may seem hypocritical considering Voldemort's own preoccupation with purebloods, it makes sense that he would think he was above the dirtying effects of his father's Muggle bloodline and the familial connection of his mother's family. He knew he was powerful even before he knew he was a descendant of Slytherin. He knew even before he was a wizard. The murder of the Riddles and framing of Morfin seems to be Voldemort's first admission that is linked to his will, not his bloodline. This recognition allows him to continue to explore the breadth of his power without the weighty question of his parentage hanging over him. This also adds ambiguity to Riddle as a character without an origin. Thus he has the freedom to move about the world without ties to anyone, answering only to himself and the will of his power. This choice, to reject his parentage and attach himself, literally, to the objects that represent his power in the wizarding world as a relative of Slytherin, is the moment when Tom Riddle becomes obsessed with gaining more power, continuing his quest for immortality.

Through the memories of Riddle's past, Rowling exposes the similarities between his circumstances and Harry's. As Elizabeth D. Schafer explains, "both characters are half-blood

orphans, invited to attend Hogwarts as young boys. Their wands possess the same kind of core, a feather from the same phoenix” (43). Rowling mirrors the upbringings of Voldemort and Harry in order to underscore the fact that, if not for his choices, Voldemort could have lived a life very similar to Harry’s. It is for this reason that Dumbledore insists Harry understand his past: to recognize one of the key bits of wisdom at the heart of the Potter series, as Dumbledore states in *Chamber of Secrets* “it is our choices that show who we truly are, far more than our abilities” (333). However, while Dumbledore suggests that our choices expose some inherent goodness/badness, Rowling develops a more nuanced understanding of choice. It seems that it is the choices of the characters that *make* them who they are. After all, Voldemort and Harry are so similar, that, if not for their different choices, they could be very similar characters.

Rowling creates Voldemort as an example of alchemical transformation. He chooses to destroy his familial line and forego his given name, resurrecting himself into a dark wizard. In fact, in the scene in which Riddle reveals his new moniker, it seems that Rowling is mirroring the kind of transmutation that alchemy theorized. Riddle writes his full name, “Tom Marvolo Riddle,” and then with a wave of his wand, the letters rearrange and Tom Marvolo Riddle becomes “I am Lord Voldemort” (*Chamber of Secrets* 314). Not only does Riddle change his name in this scene, but he changes his identity, transmuting from half-blood young wizard to dark lord. Riddle also changes his appearance, destroying his physical body when he kills Harry’s parents, and reemerging as the snake-like man we are introduced to in *Goblet of Fire*. This transition is reminiscent of the kind of alchemical transmutation required in order to achieve immortality through the Philosopher’s Stone. As Coudert describes, the alchemist “must accomplish the work of transmutation in and for himself by destroying whatever is base so that the stone may emerge” (99). Riddle, as a boy, begins the work of destroying the baseness of his

family line when he kills Morfin and starts to create horcruxes. Then, Voldemort uses the horcruxes to resurrect his body in *Goblet of Fire*, embodying the immortality that alchemy sought to achieve. This transmutation and resurrection is emphasized when Harry is able to expose the last piece of Tom Riddle's school-age quest for immortality. The memory Harry is finally able to retrieve from Slughorn in *Half-Blood Prince* proves that even as a student, young Tom Riddle was searching for ways to live forever, seeking the knowledge of those that might know more about the dark magic necessary to make the horcruxes that would keep his soul safe from mortal injury. Voldemort's quest for immortality starts after he discovers his lineage as a half-blood. In the memory Harry collects from Slughorn, Riddle questions whether or not it is possible to split a human soul in seven pieces, as seven is a the most magically powerful number. When they return from the pensieve, Dumbledore explains to Harry that the first piece of Riddles's soul was trapped in the diary he discovered in the Chamber of Secrets four years ago, and that Voldemort must have more horcruxes because he told his Death Eaters that he had "gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality" (*Half-Blood Prince* 501). He split his soul seven ways, in the diary, Slytherin's locket, Hufflepuff's cup, Ravelclaw's diadem, the Peverell ring, and his snake Nagini. The last piece of his soul reminded with him. As Dumbledore explains, when Voldemort killed James and Lily Potter, he unknowingly transferred a final piece of his soul to Harry.

Lord Voldemort's chosen moniker is interesting not only because it signals his removal from any connection to the Muggle heritage of his father, but it suggests that names are very important to Voldemort, as his is so representative of his own assumed power and free will. This defining moment changes how he sees himself, before he was a boy wizard, and after he is a lord, with magic beyond which his school can teach. Tom Riddle becomes Voldemort, which, as

Croft translates, can either mean master of death, flight from death, or will to death (156). The last of these translations is especially telling, considering Voldemort's understanding of the power of his choice. If the last translation is the most accurate, then his choice in name could reflect Voldemort's own quest for immortality, and his claim that he has the power to choose whether he lives or dies. However, he also chooses a high rank in order to position himself powerfully among even those wizards whom he considers contemporaries. He is not merely in control of his death, but he is the lord of it, a higher social class than even his wealthy father. Thus he positions himself as a powerful wizard with a great will, distinguishing himself from the man his father was, and the boy he was when he first discovered his magic. Dumbledore is one of the few wizards will to say his name out loud, highlighted in the first pages of *Sorcerer's Stone*. When Minerva McGonagall calls Voldemort You-Know-Who, Dumbledore implores "My dear Professor, surely a sensible person like yourself can call him by his name?" (11), and later advises Harry that "fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself" (298). While most wizards refer to him as He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named or You-Know-Who, Dumbledore chooses to address him as Voldemort, or, in person, as Tom. As Croft claims, Dumbledore's understanding of names exposes his recognition of the power names can have, because "to name a thing precisely and accurately is to classify, contain, and control it; to assert dominance over its interpretation [...] There is a relief in being able to name one's fears; it is the first step in conquering them" (157). Voldemort's name not only signifies his power, but it becomes powerful.

Rowling also creates a sense ambiguity in the power of Voldemort's name, though. It has little effect on Dumbledore, who refuses to call him by his chosen name, even when they meet years after he has left Hogwarts. Croft analyzes the scene in *Half-Blood Prince* when

Riddle returns to Hogwarts looking for a job at the school (159). Dumbledore continues to call Voldemort by his given name, explaining that teachers never forget their students' beginnings. Harry realizes that this is also a tactic Dumbledore uses to gain the upper hand in the confrontation, refusing to allow Voldemort to bend the terms of the interaction to his will, like he does with so many others (*Half-Blood Prince* 442). However, Croft also recognizes that Dumbledore may also be attempting to give Riddle a second chance. She claims that Dumbledore is offering Riddle "a chance to return to his earlier, pre-Voldemort life" (160). Just like with his earlier memories of Voldemort, it seems that, though Dumbledore distrusts Voldemort, he is refusing to believe that he is completely evil. Dumbledore gives Voldemort the option to forsake his name, return to his life as Tom Riddle, and abandon his power in favor of remorse. Again, Rowling highlights the ambiguity of Voldemort's decisions in this scene, as Dumbledore suggests Voldemort is not, and never chose to be, entirely evil. Voldemort's opportunity to repent is reminiscent of other early modern magicians, like Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus. In "Secret Domination or Civic Duty" Margaret J. Oakes compares Voldemort's relationship to his magical power to that of Marlowe's Faustus, claiming that they both use magic for selfish personal gain, they both work alone to attain greater magical knowledge, and they both deny their duty to a conscientious use of magic (150-1). Like Faustus, who, in the fourth scene of Marlowe's play, is compelled to repent by a good angel (lines 15-20), Dumbledore gives Voldemort the opportunity to repent. As Hermione reveals in *Deathly Hallows*, repentance is the only way Voldemort can hope to repair the damage to his soul. Peter Ciaccio highlights Hermione's research, which reveals that, once Voldemort has split his soul, he only has one hope to repair it. "Hermione tells Harry and Ron that there is, in any case, the possibility of restoring the wholeness of the soul," Ciaccio says. "It is something 'excruciatingly

painful' potentially fatal: remorse" (41). Through an incredibly remorseful act, Voldemort would be able to repair the damage to his broken soul and regain the moral integrity he lost when splitting it. What Hermione makes clear is that even after he has made all his horcruxes, Voldemort has the potential to choose good and become an ambiguous figure. Yet, Voldemort refuses. He decides that he is the only wizard worthy of immortality, and in seeking power for power's sake, Voldemort becomes the most evil character in Rowling's universe, exposing the power of choice to morally corrupt our inherently ambiguous nature as human beings.

Rowling chooses to reveal more memories of Voldemort, slowly allowing her readers to discover, along with Harry, the extent to which Voldemort's choices have made him so morally reprehensible. The memory of Hokey the house elf reveals Voldemort's visit to Hepzibah Smith, a distant descendant of Helga Hufflepuff's in possession of Hufflepuff's cup, which Voldemort admires while convincing Smith that he is merely curious about the cup. This memory also reveals that Hepzibah has also acquired Slytherin's locket that Dumbledore had shown Harry in the first memory of the Gaunts home. According to Caractacus Burke's memory, Merope sold the locket to him for a mere ten galleons shortly after escaping to London (*Half-Blood Prince* 437). The memory exposes Voldemort's discovery of his next two horcruxes, and the morally reprehensible choices he makes in order to acquire them. According to Hokey's memory, Voldemort poisoned Hepzibah and performed a memory charm on Hokey so she would remember putting something in her mistress's cocoa that was not sugar (*Half-Blood Prince* 438). Again, Rowling is suggesting that his choices are what make Voldemort so morally reprehensible. He chooses the most sinister means to immortality when there are other ways of achieving it. In fact, it is at this point in the narrative that Harry questions why he chose this means to immortality, when it would have been easier, and less evil, to steal or make a Sorcerer's

Stone. Voldemort explores all three of the means to immortality, but he rejects the Sorcerer's Stone because it does not offer him complete freedom. Dumbledore explains that Voldemort chooses singular pursuits, preferring to work alone. "I believe," Dumbledore continues, "that he would have found the thought of being dependent, even on the Elixir, intolerable" (*Half-Blood Prince* 502). The Sorcerer's Stone requires the possessor to continually take the Elixir of Life to achieve immortality. If Voldemort used the Stone and it was destroyed or lost, he would die. Voldemort's decision to use horcruxes, rather than the Sorcerer's Stone, reveals him as a morally reprehensible character. He not only chooses the means to immortality that is the most morally reprehensible because it requires murder to be successful, but he chooses this means out of sheer selfish desire to be independent from the Elixir.

Rowling focuses our attention on Voldemort's creation of the horcruxes to highlight his destructive decisions, but his search for immortality becomes a search for power. Thus, at certain points in the novel Voldemort *does* seek all means to immortality, seemingly to ensure his immortality, but also to ensure that he is singularly immortal. First he splits his soul into seven horcruxes. After his encounter with baby Harry Potter, he is left weak, searching for a way to be restored to his body. So, he seeks the Stone, hoping it will repair him. However, this method is insufficient, or as Dumbledore claims, intolerable to Voldemort. So, when Voldemort's attempt to capture the Stone is thwarted, he begins his search for the Deathly Hallows. Voldemort's quest for immortality should have ended when he made his horcruxes, yet he continues to seek it through other means. This seems more than simply a safeguard for his horcruxes. Voldemort's quest for immortality becomes a quest for the singular power to live forever. Kate Behr points out that not only is Voldemort's search obsessive, it is also selfish. The Sorcerer's Stone offers the possessor alone an indefinitely prolonged life, but the Resurrection Stone, which has similar

abilities, is of no interest to Voldemort because he “neither wants to die himself nor to confer a second life on others” (Behr 268-9). Voldemort’s search for the Stone and the Hallows not only maintains his own immortality, but also ensures that he is the only being who will ever become immortal.

Just as with the Mirror of Erised, Rowling introduces desire as another mode of choice for Voldemort to further complicate the ambiguity of choosing immortality. David Baggett points out what motivates Voldemort’s moral choices is the same thing that motivates Harry, desire. Baggett explains that “The contents of Harry’s and Voldemort’s desires *do* matter! To imply that what they want is not as important as the simple fact that they happen to pursue what they want is confused. It leaves out of the picture one of the most important morally differentiating factors of all” (164). Selfishness alone does not make Voldemort evil, for Harry also does most things with his own desires in mind. It is how Voldemort chooses to be selfish and what he chooses to be selfish about that makes him so morally revolting. Harry desire selfishly to see his parents again. This is a somewhat harmless desire, as he can achieve it without hurting others. However Voldemort’s desires are much more sinister, and Voldemort’s selfishness corrupts his ability to understand or possess a moral code, and blinds him to the morals, circumstances, and desires of those around him.

Rowling shows us that Voldemort’s quest for immortality causes him to make selfish choices. This selfishness is morally repugnant. Voldemort’s actions are so inexcusable that those he keeps in his employ must be nearly as morally depraved. As Kate Behr reminds us, “Rowling, through Dumbledore, consistently reinforces two things about Voldemort’s character: that he is terrified of death, and that he cannot understand love” (268). This fear of death harkens back to the fear of death that Coudert claims compelled alchemists to search for the secret to immortality



in the first place. Voldemort is so terrified of death, in fact, that he goes out of his way to protect his immortality, and his inability to understand love causes him to make choices that morally corrupt him. By highlighting two of Voldemort's weaknesses, Behr reminds us that Rowling writes Voldemort to make choices that decide his fate, choosing the darkest means to immortality and becoming evil, rather than ambiguous.

Rowling's creation of Voldemort's character and his similarities to Harry, along with the connections to alchemy she employs, exposes the ambiguity of the decision to live forever. Rowling admits that Flamel had used the Stone to become immortal without consequence, and the moral ambiguity of this action is obvious. However Flamel's choice to relinquish his immortality turn him from a morally ambiguous character to a morally righteous one. Voldemort's use of horcruxes to achieve immortality make him the ultimate evil character in *Potter*. Through her depiction of Voldemort's horcruxes, Rowling is constantly reminding her readers that choosing to pursue immortality is morally ambiguous, but when the choices made to achieve immortality are morally reprehensible, the pursuit itself becomes corrupted. "The effects of evil extend far beyond one's victim or one's community; the effects of evil are also received in the person of the evildoer" Jennifer Hart Weed says, reiterating the idea that morally reprehensible choices have lasting consequences on personal development and identity. Weed points out "Voldemort's progressive worsening throughout the stories should serve to teach readers about the self-destructive effects of evil and the ugliness of a wicked character. This self-destruction can be explicitly connected with Voldemort's choice of actions, for example his murderous attempts, his manipulation of the weak, or his killing of animals." (157). By disregarding the many opportunities to choose a different path, Voldemort becomes more and more morally corrupt, until he represents the ultimate evil. David and Catherine Deavel evoke

this message when they say “choosing evil is to choose something less” and therefore it is an easier choice (145). Ultimately, what makes Voldemort so morally corrupt is not his lineage or the fact that he possesses a very strong understanding of magic, it is the choice he makes to pursue a means to immortality that requires morally reprehensible acts, and to disregard any opportunity to repent. These choices are rooted in the moral ambiguity of seeking immortality. Peter Ciaccio explains this distinction when he says, “even the eternal struggle between Good and Evil, which is at the basis of Rowling’s books and, indeed, most of children’s literature, is not presented in a black-and-white way. In *Harry Potter*, people are not divided between absolutely good and absolutely bad: the question is not about *who* is good and *who* is bad, it is rather about *what* is good and *what* is bad” (42).

## THE DEATHLY HALLOWS

*It was only when he had attained a great age that the youngest brother finally took off the Cloak of Invisibility and gave it to his son. And then he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, equals, they departed this life —“The Tale of the Three Brothers,” *Deathly Hallows* 409*

Not only did alchemists seek the secret to immortality, but the secret of the Stone also seemed to be immortal, as alchemists throughout centuries tried and failed to produce the Philosopher’s Stone. Rowling’s Stone also implies there is a secret to immortality that does not get lost in time. After all, once Rowling’s Flamel discovered the secret, he could not only live forever, but the secret to creating the Stone would also never go into disuse. However, Rowling’s Flamel chooses to give up his immortality, greeting Death as an old friend the same way the youngest of the three brothers does. Yet, the secret is still alive in Rowling’s text, and a wizard could conceivably create another Stone. Though he does not live forever, the Flamel legend persists after his mortal death. Rowling creates means to immortality that are seemingly immortal themselves, just like Flamel’s story. In the final installment in the series, Rowling introduces Harry to the last means to immortality: the Deathly Hallows.

Rowling’s introduction to the Hallows allows us to further understand the ambiguity of choosing immortality, and of the human desire to live forever. Indeed, the Hallows are sought after by a small but loyal group of followers, in much the same way that the elite group of historical alchemists sought the secret to creating the Philosopher’s Stone. The Elder Wand, the Resurrection Stone, and the Cloak of Invisibility in Rowling’s tale have been sought after for as long as any character in *Potter* can recollect. When united, the Hallows make the possessor the master of Death. Rowling introduces them through a fairytale from *The Tales of Beadle the*

*Bard*, making the status of the objects ambiguous. After all, most of the characters in Rowling's text do not recognize the Hallows as objects that exist in their world, but as tools used to imply a message about seeking immortality. The Hallows are the most illusive of the three means to immortality that Rowling provides. They betray their owners, just as Death betrays the brothers. They can be taken away or used against their owners. They are also the most difficult to find of the three means to immortality. They cannot be created, like the horcruxes. And, unlike the Sorcerer's Stone, their whereabouts are fairly unknown because the items change hands often. The mystery and exclusivity of the Hallows, much like the mystery surrounding alchemists and uncovering the secret to immortality, makes the items highly coveted. The Hallows are also the most powerful means to immortality. The master of Death does not have to rely on a potion in order to maintain immortality, the way Flamel relies on the Elixir of Life, made from the Stone in order to stay alive forever. And, they do not require an act of murder, the way the creation of a horcrux does. Therefore, the Hallows are also the most potentially destructive means to immortality, as they are coveted and elusive, causing many to search for them without success.

Rowling creates the Hallows as a representation of historical alchemical discovery. They are coveted and mysterious, just as the secret to creating the Stone was by pre-modern alchemists. This secrecy also relies on ambiguity in the form of symbolism. In much the same way that historical alchemists developed symbols for elements, encoded their texts, and created new words to discuss alchemy covertly, the followers of Hallows rely on its symbol to expose themselves to other believers. The symbol of the Deathly Hallows first appears on Xenophilius Lovegood's necklace at Bill and Fleur's wedding. After seeing the symbol again as part of Dumbledore's signature in a letter to Grindelwald, Harry, Hermione, and Ron visit Xenophilius to learn more about the symbol and its connection to Dumbledore. Xenophilius claims that the

“Tale of the Three Brothers” tells them all they need to know about the Hallows. Hermione reads the story from *The Tales of Beadle the Bard*, which recounts three brothers who were granted the Hallows by Death as prizes for thwarting his attempt to drown them in a river by using magic to build a bridge (*Deathly Hallows* 407). According to Lisa Hopkins, the means to immortality that the brothers choose “offer an object lesson in siblings making different choices, so much so indeed that their story is uncertainly positioned between being real-life historical narrative and emblematic, morally oriented fable” (71). The Elder wand, which Dumbledore wins in battle versus Grindelwald, is created by the eldest brother and allows the possessor to defeat Death and changes ownership after its possessor is defeated in battle. The Resurrection Stone, the same ring that Marvolo Gaunt covets and Voldemort turns into a horcrux, is created by the middle brother allows the possessor to recall others from Death. The Cloak of Invisibility, the same cloak that Harry’s father passes down to Harry, is created by the youngest brother and allows the possessor to hide from Death. Each brother chooses a different means to defeat death, but in the end, no brother can truly become immortal. However, the story of their creation does seem to be very old, as most fairytales do. This suggests that not only will the possessor of the Hallows live forever, but also the Hallows, from their point of their creation, could potentially live for eternity. The three instruments, when possessed by the same person, make one master of Death, allowing the possessor to defeat Death, overcome Death, and hide from Death, and if the master of Death is immortal, so, too, are the Hallows. Thus, Rowling writes the Deathly Hallows as the most direct means to immortality, making them coveted, like alchemical secrets, by those who believe their power, including Xenophilius, Voldemort, Dumbledore, and Grindelwald.

Rowling complicates our understanding of the ambiguous Hallows even further when she introduces Dumbledore as an early seeker of them. “As the narrative continues,” Kate Behr

recognizes, “it becomes harder for Harry (and consequently for the reader) to distinguish good wizards from evil ones” (267). Dumbledore is a perfect example of this complication.

Dumbledore’s search for the Hallows is driven by a belief that becoming the master of Death is way to protect the world from danger. After his death, Rita Skeeter’s book reveals Dumbledore’s search for the Hallows, his friendship with Gellert Grindelwald, and his complicated familial relationships that ultimately led him to give up the search for the Hallows. Dumbledore does not wish to find the Hallows and become master of Death in order to have power over the wizarding world. He claims he wishes to achieve immortality in order to protect Muggles and wizards alike. Dumbledore and Grindelwald believed in their youth that their power gave them the right to rule over Muggles, and that ruling over them was for the Muggles own good (*Deathly Hallows* 357). According to the history Rowling provides, Dumbledore believed that finding the Hallows and becoming the master of Death was for “the greater good” of all people. However, that message becomes skewed when considering that Grindelwald used the phrase as justification for devaluing Muggles as a lesser race of people. In fact, “for the greater good” became Grindelwald’s motto, which Hermione later links to the motto the Ministry of Magic uses when Voldemort gains control—“It’s ‘Magic is Might’ all over again” (361). “For the greater good” was the foundational phrase on which Grindelwald built an argument for committing later atrocities in the wizarding world, and it came not from Grindelwald, but as a statement in a letter Dumbledore wrote to him when they were friends.

Your point about Wizard dominance being FOR THE MUGGLES’ OWN GOOD – this, I think, is the crucial point. Yes, we have been given power and yes, that power gives us the right to rule, but it also gives us responsibilities over the ruled. We must stress this point, it will be the foundation stone upon which we build.

Where we are opposed, as we surely will be, this must be the basis of all our counterarguments. We seize control FOR THE GREATER GOOD. And from this it follows that where we meet resistance, we must use only the force that is necessary and no more. (*Deathly Hallows* 357).

Through the letter, Rowling gives her readers the opportunity to question Dumbledore's choices, and suggests that even the wisest wizard can be fallible and becomes ambiguous. Dumbledore's ambiguity is emphasized in the letter Rowling provides: he even signs the letter using the symbol of the Deathly Hallows, which is how Harry is able to recognize it as the same symbol Xenophilius Lovegood wears.

Rowling's creation of Dumbledore's backstory allows us to further recognize the ambiguity of her characters, even, and especially, those that seem so good. As Rita Skeeter describes it in her biography, Dumbledore's mother died shortly after he finished school, and he returned home to Godric's Hollow to care for his younger sister Ariana and brother Aberforth. It was there that he met Grindelwald and they started discussing ways to discover the Deathly Hallows and rule over the Muggles. However, Ariana died shortly after Dumbledore returned to his home and was distracted in caring for his sister by his newfound friendship with Grindelwald. As Aberforth describes, Albus, Aberforth and Grindelwald fought and Ariana was killed trying to stop them from destroying each other (*Deathly Hallows* 567). After Ariana's death, Grindelwald and Dumbledore severed all ties and did not meet again until Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald years later. Molly Peters explains that the cause of Ariana's death is what may have ultimately led Dumbledore down the path in opposition to Grindelwald. Peters says "Ariana's death plagues Dumbledore for the rest of his life, for not only did he feel responsible, as he had been wrapped up in his own goals, but Dumbledore did not know who cast the fatal spell" (61).

It seems that it is not a change of heart that drives Dumbledore away from the quest for the Deathly Hallows that he and Grindelwald began that summer, but extreme guilt over the murder of his sister. Indeed, guilt seems to be the catalyst that drives Dumbledore to recognize the flaw Grindelwald's "Greater Good." He commits the rest of his life to helping young wizards learn to use their magic wisely and righteously. However, whether the choice to forgo the search for the Hallows is made out of guilt or of a true change of heart makes no difference. Rowling emphasizes the fact that it is Dumbledore's choice to end his search for the Hallows that makes him a morally righteous character.

Rowling waits to reveal Dumbledore's ambiguity until the end of the series in order to suggest that, though he is an ambiguous character, our interpretation of Dumbledore as a morally righteous character is not necessarily wrong. Rowling writes Dumbledore as a representation of ambiguous goodness, which can be connected to many historical alchemists who practiced the art with the goal of revealing more about the world around them. In *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Keith Thomas perfectly describes what alchemists like Sir Isaac Newton and his contemporaries believed about their alchemical pursuits. Thomas claims that they thought of themselves as "pursuing an exacting spiritual discipline, rather than a crude quest for gold. The transmutation of metals was secondary to the main aim, which was the spiritual transformation of the adept" (Thomas 269). In the end, Dumbledore decides to end his quest for immortality. Though he does eventually acquire the Elder Wand, Dumbledore is never able to unite the Hallows. He does possess the cloak for a short time, and eventually discovers Gaunt's ring, but never the three objects at once. Like Harry, Dumbledore seeks the Peverell ring above the other Hallows, as it could allow him to see Ariana again, perhaps dispelling some of the guilt he feels for her death. Of course, by the time Dumbledore finds the ring, Voldemort has already turned it



into a horcrux without knowing its power as one of the Hallows. The curse Voldemort puts on the ring causes the wearer to be cursed, and this curse is what ends up killing Albus Dumbledore as he attempts to use the ring to see Ariana again. In choosing Ariana over immortality, Dumbledore ensures his own death. Dumbledore recognizes that he is not a worthy master of Death, explaining

Maybe a man in a million could unite the Hallows, Harry. I was fit only to possess the meanest of them, the least extraordinary. I was fit to own the Elder Wand, and not to boast of it, and not to kill with it. I was permitted to tame and to use it, because I took it, not for gain, but to save the others from it. But the Cloak, I took out of vain curiosity and so it could never have worked for me as it works for you, its true owner. The stone I would have used in an attempt to drag back those who are at peace, rather than to enable my self-sacrifice, as you did. You are the worthy possessor of the Hallows (*Deathly Hallows* 720).

When he appears to Harry in the limbo version of King's Cross Station, Dumbledore still expresses regret at his choice to pursue immortality, even for a short time. Dumbledore never forgives himself for his hand in Ariana's murder. His guilt plagues him even in death, and he claims that he merely learned to live with it, rather than ever moving on. Dumbledore says that his one desire when discovering the Peverell ring was to use the Resurrection Stone to see his sister and parents again and apologize for all he had done to destroy his family. Dumbledore tells Harry "when I discovered it, after all those years, buried in the abandoned home of the Gaunts [...] I quite forgot that it was now a Horcrux, that the ring was sure to carry a curse. I picked it up, and put it on, and for a second I imagined that I was about to see Ariana" (719). Harry says it was natural that he would want to see his family again. After all, Harry can understand better

than anyone Dumbledore's desire to see his family. But his desire to be reunited with his family clouded his judgment, and from the moment he put the ring on Dumbledore was cursed. It is clear in this moment that Dumbledore's curse is not caused by the ring, but by his guilt over the deaths of his mother and sister. The epitaph on Ariana and Kendra's tomb seems to highlight Dumbledore's guilty conscience. Nicholas Sheltroun and Peter Ciaccio both discuss the epitaph in moral terms. The tomb reads: "where your treasure is, there your heart will also be." The epitaph, a passage from Matthew 6:21, highlights Dumbledore's guilt and desire to see Ariana again, as it suggests that Ariana is Dumbledore's treasure, and therefore his heart is always with her, distracted by the guilt of her death. Unlike Faustus and Voldemort, Dumbledore appears to repent, and thus Rowling allows us to interpret him not only as ambiguous, but also as ambiguously good.

Rowling exposes this recognition when Harry meets Dumbledore in the limbo of King's Cross. When discussing Harry's choice to pursue the destruction of the horcruxes, rather than collecting the Deathly Hallows, Dumbledore calls the Hallows "a desperate man's dream" and "a lure for fools," recognizing that Harry chose a smarter path than he did in his own youth. "Master of death, Harry, master of Death!" Dumbledore shouts, "Was I better, ultimately, than Voldemort?" (713). Harry, of course, replies that the difference between Dumbledore's attempt to conquer death was different from Voldemort's because of the means through which he attempted to become immortal. "Hallows, not horcruxes," Harry emphasizes, reminding the limbo version of Dumbledore that, yes, he, too sought immortality, but he never killed if he could avoid it, and that his path to immortality was much less brutal than Voldemort's (713). In this way, Harry reminds Dumbledore that his choices were far more admirable than Voldemort's.

In fact, Harry's insistence that Dumbledore's choices made him every bit the good wizard he is thought to be is a quite convincing argument at the end of the series. When Aberforth describes Ariana's death, and Albus's part in it, he blames Albus wholeheartedly, convinced that his brother was free from burden after Ariana's death, guiltless and happy. Harry refutes this, telling Aberforth that Dumbledore was never free from the guilt of Ariana's death, as proved by his response to the poison in the cave as they attempted to retrieve one of Voldemort's many horcruxes: Slytherin's locket: "He thought he was back there with you and Grindelwald, I know he did," Harry explains, describing Dumbledore's ordeal in the cave and his pleas to die (*Deathly Hallows* 568). Alice Mills describes Harry's assertion of Dumbledore's guilt as a defining moment, as Harry is choosing to remember Dumbledore as his wise Headmaster and mentor, rather than sully his memory with thoughts of his radical youth. Mills questions Harry's decision not to ask Dumbledore who killed Ariana, asking "Is Harry merely anxious to spare Albus any fresh grief in the revisiting the event, or is he not at all certain that Gellert was the killer, and afraid that Albus might incriminate either himself or his brother?" (250). However, it doesn't matter to Harry who killed Ariana, as the Dumbledore he knew is the one he chooses to remember, attempting to disregard any part of Dumbledore's past that changes this impression for Harry. In this way, Harry too makes a choice about immortality, or at least the immortality of memory. He chooses to remember Dumbledore for all of the good decisions he made, rather than linger on the bad choice he made in his youth. Harry immortalizes Dumbledore's memory for himself, conserving his opinion of Dumbledore as a morally righteous wizard. Rowling thus introduces to a new interpretation of immortality, suggesting that the concept, too, is ambiguous.

Rowling ensures we read Dumbledore as an ambiguous figure when his secrecy causes us to question his motives. It is true that the young Albus Dumbledore was obsessed with gaining

power and pursuing the Deathly Hallows. But, the Dumbledore that Rowling emphasizes to her readers is one who values knowledge. It is this depiction of Dumbledore that most resembles those scientists and alchemists that used alchemy to pursue greater knowledge of the universe. Margaret J. Oakes compares Dumbledore to Shakespeare's Prospero in his search for knowledge. Oakes quotes Prospero, "I, thus neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated/To closeness and the bettering of my mind (1.2.89-90)," explaining that, "Prospero does not study magic for wealth or material pleasures, but puts his personal desire for more knowledge ahead of the need to learn how to use it" (150). Indeed, Prospero recognizes that he neglects the world in favor of the pursuit of knowledge. Dumbledore, too, often puts his desire for knowledge ahead of the repercussions it could cause. He encounters the Peverell ring and immediately puts it on, wondering whether it is the same ring from the legend of The Three Brothers, and thus he is cursed. He also involves Harry in some of these knowledge-seeking quests, going back in time to save Buckbeak in *Prisoner of Azkaban*, using Harry as for insight into Voldemort's plans in *Order of the Phoenix*, and bringing Harry along on a quest to discover one of Voldemort's horcruxes, the locket of Salazar Slytherin. All of these attempts to gain insight, knowledge, and truth end up getting someone hurt. However, like Prospero, Dumbledore recognizes that he makes a in his relentless pursuit of magical knowledge when he reveals to Harry that he hastily used the Peverell ring, forgetting it was a horcrux. The mistakes Dumbledore makes in pursuit of knowledge do eventually lead to positive outcomes. They allow Harry to save himself, his friends, and the whole of the wizarding world from the power of Lord Voldemort. Ultimately, Dumbledore decided that the potential outcomes of these quests for further knowledge and understanding were more important than the risks they posed.

Nevertheless, Dumbledore turns his life away from the destructive quest for power and immortality. Instead, he focuses on seeking knowledge and helping others to do the same. In limbo, Dumbledore describes his career at Hogwarts to Harry as the safest option for his power-hungry mind, explaining that he turned down multiple offers to be Minister of Magic because he worried he would be corrupted by the lure of power. Yet Dumbledore's influence on the students of Hogwarts is remarkable. He influenced hundreds of students before Harry's story even began and found a way to posthumously teach Harry, Ron, and Hermione about the Deathly Hallows, giving them insight into their own desires and showing them which tools they would need in order to defeat Voldemort. In his will, Dumbledore leaves Ron his deluminator, which allows him to rejoin his friends along their quest for horcruxes. Ron's return is crucial to Voldemort's defeat, as it takes all three protagonists to find the last few horcruxes and destroy them. Dumbledore leaves Hermione *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, which contains "The Tale of the Three Brothers," the story based on the creation of the Deathly Hallows. This connects their search for the horcruxes to their search for the Hallows, and signals to Harry that he would need to procure the Elder Wand in order to defeat Voldemort in battle. The final object willed to Harry is the snitch from his first quidditch match. Engraved with the phrase *I open at the close* and containing the Peverell ring, the snitch provides Harry with the final piece of the Hallows he needs to face Voldemort and become master of Death. Thus, Dumbledore continues to provide the three protagonists with all of the information they need to be successful without him, continuing to teach even in death. In this way, too, it seems he has gained the immortality that he searched for in life. Though he does not defeat death, Dumbledore lives beyond his death, and Rowling proves that even death is an ambiguous concept.

Rowling's depiction of Dumbledore demonstrates the importance and ambiguity of choice in the search for immortality. Dumbledore's decisions regarding his search for immortality were quite selfish when he was younger, and they lead to the death of his sister. However, his knowledge of the Hallows allows Harry to gain the tools he needs to defeat Voldemort. Dumbledore chooses to leave Harry clues that give him the information he needs in order to defeat Voldemort, including knowledge of the Hallows that allows him to recognize his control of the Elder Wand. He also wills Harry the Resurrection Stone, the last of the Hallows Harry needs in order to become master of Death. Through the clues left by Dumbledore after his death, and the choices he makes in order to inform Harry of the Hallows, Rowling reminds her readers that what makes Dumbledore good is not inherent, but something he must continually choose. John Granger also reminds us that, for Dumbledore, there are worse things than not living forever when he says "Rowling tells us (through Dumbledore) that what is worse than an absence of life is an absence of love—and that love trumps death just as light overcomes darkness" (67).

Rowling's use of alchemy gives us even more understanding of the ambiguity of the choices surrounding the notion of immortality. Alchemy is, as John Read explains, "a strange blend of logical thinking and mystical dreaming, of sound observation and wild superstition, of natural and moral ideas, and of objective facts and subjective conceptions" (278). Alchemy is an ambiguous practice, somewhere in between science and magic. Rowling uses alchemy in order to connect these ambiguities to the ambiguities of her characters choices and identities. Through depictions of alchemy and immortality, Rowling harkens back to both historical accounts of alchemists like Flamel, and literary accounts of alchemical practices, like those of Marlowe's Faustus and Shakespeare's Prospero. In relating her own interpretation of alchemy with

historical and literary accounts, Rowling is able to solidify our understanding of the ambiguities in alchemy, immortality, and moral identities.

Rowling writes her hero as ambiguous, too, undercutting the notion that even he is easy to qualify. Harry, like most of Rowling's ambiguous characters, is forced to make choices regarding immortality. He must choose to pursue the horcruxes instead of the Hallows. He must choose to die at Voldemort's hand in order to destroy the piece of his soul that dwells within him. And, he must choose to return from limbo in order to defeat Voldemort once and for all. When he meets Dumbledore at King's Cross Dumbledore tells him that it is his choice to stay or leave the limbo-like place. "If you choose to return," Dumbledore tells Harry, "there is a chance he may be finished for good. I cannot promise it. But I know this, Harry, that you have less to fear from returning here than he does." (*Deathly Hallows* 722). Harry, unlike Voldemort and Dumbledore, never struggles with the decision to become immortal. Even when discovering the Hallows, he quickly destroys them. But, in the King's Cross version of limbo he does seem to struggle with continuing to live. He makes a choice that seems as difficult as sacrificing his life, only he is sacrificing his death in order to defeat Voldemort and protect the wizarding world. What Dumbledore tells Harry after the destruction of the Sorcerer's Stone seems to ring especially true when considering Dumbledore's death, as well as Harry's time in limbo: "After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 297).

## CONCLUSION: THE IMMORTALITY OF *POTTER*

*He'll be famous—a legend—I wouldn't be surprised if today was known as Harry Potter day in the future—there will be books written about Harry—every child in our world will know his name!*—Minerva McGonagall, *Sorcerer's Stone* 13

As far as we know, Flamel never achieved the immortality that he was rumored to have gained. However, Flamel's name and the alchemical legend of the Stone have become infamous. Immortality, it seems, may mean more than simply eluding death. Perhaps true immortality is living beyond a mortal death, through the minds and memories of others. Rowling certainly offers this definition several times throughout *Potter*, suggesting that even our definitions of life, death, and immortality are ambiguous.

Rowling is clearly concerned with the pursuit of immortality as she highlights the three means to immortality throughout *Potter*. But, overcoming the fear of death through immortal means is not something that Rowling seems to value. The Sorcerer's Stone, the horcruxes, and the Deathly Hallows all represent means to immortality, and they are all ultimately unsuccessful. The choice between living forever and sacrificing one's life for the well being of others is emphasized throughout *Potter*, and Voldemort's pursuit of immortality is likened to Dumbledore's own quest to live forever. Harry, in his attempt to defeat Voldemort, also chooses to momentarily pursue a means to immortality. While neither Voldemort nor Dumbledore is ever able to achieve the immortality they so desire, Harry does become master of Death for a short while, proving again what he was taught when he defeated Voldemort and gained possession of the Sorcerer's Stone: those who choose to pursue immortality to protect the world are the people most capable of achieving it. Dumbledore explains that this is why Harry is 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” (*Deathly Hallows* 721). It is clear from the way she emphasizes the pursuit of immortality that Rowling believes the most righteous path is the one Harry chooses, sacrificing one’s own life for the good of others, rather than pursuing immortality and forsaking others. Again, we are reminded of Dumbledore’s words to Harry after the destruction of Riddle’s diary: *It is our choices that show who we truly are, far more than our abilities* (*Chamber of Secrets* 333).

The memory that Harry extracts from Snape in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, exposes the truth about Snape’s alliance with Voldemort and the promise he made to Dumbledore to protect Harry at all costs, and displaying the long-held affection Snape had for Harry’s mother Lily. According to Molly Peters, “Snape’s choices after the initial fall of the Dark Lord are indicative of his inherent goodness” (63), but, even after this revelation, Snape is not redeemed as a completely good character. After all, he was one of Harry’s harshest bullies. Instead, Snape’s choices are indicative of his *ambiguity* as a character. Snape chooses to help Voldemort not because he is inherently anything, but because he wants to honor his love for Lily by protecting her son. Thus, Rowling writes Snape to represent the ambiguity of choice. Like most of her characters, Snape is morally defined by the choices he makes. These choices are revised over and over again in order to emphasize or undercut the initial impression that he is inherently anything but a morally ambiguous character. Snape makes both good and bad decisions, and rather than being a completely good or completely evil character, he falls somewhere in between good and evil.

By framing her narrative to include the final revelation of Snape’s sacrifice, Rowling connects Snape’s ambiguity to that of Flamel, and therefore to the ambiguity of alchemy. Snape’s story, like Flamel’s, is not necessarily a story of sacrifice. It is an example of something

in between sacrifice and selfishness. After all, just as Flamel's morality is defined (or undefined) by the choices he makes regarding his immortality, Snape's morality is also defined by the choices he makes in service of his love for a single person. This love seems so consuming that Snape would rather die, sacrificing the possibility of immortality, to protect Lily's memory. This is evidenced in Snape's patronus, which takes the form of Lily's, a doe. Considering that the patronus is supposed to be a representation of the soul, it is clear that Snape's love for Lily and heartbreak over her death has consumed him. (*Deathly Hallows* 687). Snape also pleads with Harry to take his literal memories of Lily from him, and his last words "Look...at...me" (*Deathly Hallows* 658) are further proof that all of his choices were made in service to his love for Lily. He takes his last breath to look into Harry's eyes, which are just like those of the girl he has loved all his life. It is clear that Snape is never truly evil, but is also clear that he is not truly good. He chooses the memory of Lily over the possible power and immortality Voldemort can offer, but it doesn't erase his past choices. Thus, Snape remains an ambiguous figure, just as both the historical Flamel and Rowling's revision of him remain ambiguous.

Rowling changes the meaning of immortality for her readers. Rather than never dying, Rowling's characters are immortal even after death, most often through memory, emphasizing the ambiguity of immortal life. Snape keeps Lily alive in his memory of her. The memory of Harry's parents stays with him as he appears to them when he goes into the Forbidden Forest to face Voldemort. Dumbledore's memory of Ariana stays alive long after her death. Dumbledore himself is alive well beyond his mortal death through the memories of those he influenced. He leaves Harry, Ron and Hermione messages through his will, his wisdom continuing to guide them. His appearance in Harry's King's Cross limbo also seems to be a sort of memory, as he replies when Harry asks if it's all in his head with "Of course it's all happening inside your head,

but why on Earth should that mean it's not real?" (*Deathly Hallows* 716). Snape is alive in memory long after his physical death, as his memories allow Harry to understand the sacrifice Snape makes, keeping him alive in Harry's memories. Harry also keeps the memory of both Dumbledore and Snape alive through his son, Albus Severus. Memory seems to be an ambiguous, fourth means to immortality for Rowling, and perhaps the most preferable. Those who choose immortality through memory, as Snape and Dumbledore eventually do, choose the least destructive path and perhaps the most effective, as memory can be passed from person to person eternally. Jason T. Eberl connects memory to the concept of immortality through our own perceptions of time. "Perhaps," Eberl states, "we are best defined as conscious, thinking entities which consist of past and present perceptions connected by memory" (212). Our memories connect us to our past and present selves, and to each other. Memories are what make us immortal.

For Rowling, choices are what matter most; they make us who and what we are, even if who and what we are is ambiguous. Rowling's characters are continually faced with hard choices, and, much like real life, they often choose paths that are not good or easy. Choosing to pursue immortality cannot always be ethically justified, exemplified by Voldemort's search for immortality that leads to the murders of many people, as well as his ultimate destruction. Likewise, power can corrupt a mind as strong as Albus Dumbledore's. The guilt from his decision to seek out the Deathly Hallows is something that Dumbledore's carries with him his entire life, and even in death. Thus, his path to immortality is just as ambiguous and dangerous as Voldemort's. Through depictions of alchemical ideas related to immortality, and her characterization of the choices surrounding the pursuit of immortality, Rowling uses ambiguity to complicate our understanding of choice. It is Harry's path that Rowling seems to favor,

suggesting that only when you do not desire immortality are you worthy of becoming the master of Death. Harry seeks immortality not for power or under the guise of the greater good, but for a truly righteous purpose: to destroy immortality. In slaying Voldemort and forsaking the Hallows, Harry not only uses immortality to defeat evil, but he uses immortality to ensure that immortality can never again be achieved. However, Harry's choice is also ambiguous. He is reluctant to take on his role as The Chosen One, and he never chooses outright the path he takes, he is lead by others. Rowling's use of Harry's ambiguous decisions suggests that choices do not always make us good or bad people, but rather they make us human, and therefore mortal.

Rowling's depiction of Harry's willingness to change from a person who is dismissive of his responsibilities as The Chosen One to someone who actively searches for a way to defeat Voldemort suggests that perhaps the path to immortality is not indicative of one's ability to choose a moral path, but of the ability to change paths: to become better. Self-sacrifice is Harry's vehicle for this change—he puts the well-being of others ahead of his own, and in sacrificing himself at the hands of Voldemort, he is ultimately able to defeat Voldemort. Self-sacrifice also allows those who sacrifice themselves to be immortalized in the memories of those important to them. For instance, when Lily sacrifices herself to save Harry, she is immortalized in the memories of those who love her, Snape most of all. Indeed, people are immortalized in many different ways through memory: in family portraits, in names, and in the stories that are told about them. The only character who dies in Rowling's series and is not remembered seems to be Voldemort, who has no one to care about him. There are no portraits of him, and Harry's scar ceases to hurt after his death. In this way, Rowling suggests that immortality is not merely the physical act of living forever, but it is also a representational act, as we are dependent upon others to keep us alive even after death.

Harry seems to choose memory as a form of immortality, too. At least, we choose that for him. Harry Potter has become a household name, and it seems that Rowling stumbled upon a kind of immortality with the creation of the world of *Potter*. Rowling's text itself has become immortal, much like the story of Flamel that Rowling uses to introduce us to her world. Rowling's series emphasizes the human truth that, like alchemists attempting to discover the secret to immortality, we all fear death and what we will leave behind. *Harry Potter* has sold over 400 million copies worldwide, making Rowling the eleventh most popular author of all time (Scholastic). *Potter* will certainly survive beyond Rowling's own life. The physical text and our memories of reading and seeing *Potter* will continue to influence and affect young readers and viewers for generations to come. The series has already become ubiquitous worldwide as story of good versus evil. Indeed, to echo Minerva McGonagall's first assessment of Harry Potter's future, "every child in our world will know his name" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 12). It is as if Rowling's series achieved immortality by accident, just as Harry does, as if she captured a piece of her soul in the series—an alternate version of Tom Riddle's diary. Though it is neither the product of a quest for power nor a pursuit of knowledge, the immortality of the world of Rowling's characters is unquestionable.

Rowling writes Snape's death to remind us that choices matter more than past mistakes, and that we can always choose differently, and we can always refuse to choose. In fact, Rowling characterizes ambiguity as the most desirable of these choices. "What makes the plot so dynamic" David and Catherine Deavel explain, "is that it follows the complicated pattern of real life. Neither Harry nor any of the other characters, including Dumbledore and Voldemort, is either all good or all evil. As Sirius tells Harry, '[T]he world isn't split into good people and Death Eaters' (OP, 302). For example, Professor Snape, a former Death Eater who can barely

hide his dislike for Harry's father and, largely by association, for Harry, has chosen to renounce past ties and fight with Dumbledore against Voldemort's return" (146). Perhaps Snape's decision and his ambiguous characterization also suggest that some goals are not worth the sacrifice required to achieve them. Snape could have gained immortality and immense power if he had stayed a Death Eater, but after Lily's death, Dumbledore helps him to recognize the price of immortality. In fact, it seems that all of Rowling's ambiguous characters, the ones that ultimately recognize immortality is not worth the sacrifice, are the characters that find a means to immortality through memory. Voldemort, on the other hand, destroys memories, like those of his family, in favor of immortality. However, he does not become immortal even through memory. When he is gone, he is gone forever, as Rowling emphasizes when she lets us know that Harry's scar hasn't bothered him in the nineteen years following his triumph over Lord Voldemort (759). It seems that choosing to remember, rather than destroying memory, is the way that Snape and the other characters are finally able to achieve immortality. Rather than following Voldemort and sacrificing everything for immortality and power, Snape chooses a new path, one that leads to protecting the memory of Lily, and ultimately, protecting the wizarding world through his secrecy and deception. Snape's words to Dumbledore in the final memories Harry sees provide evidence of his never-ending love for Lily. But, they also suggest that the sacrifices made for love or the betterment of the world are immortal sacrifices and that the characters who make them are immortal, too, surviving in memory for lifetimes, like the legend of Flamel. Will we choose to remember *Potter*? Always.

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