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Hannah E. Degn

Brigham Young University, hannah.degn@gmail.com

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Metempsychosis in the Wizarding World

Hannah E. Degn

Death is but crossing the world, as friends do the seas; they live in one another still. For they must needs be present, that love and live in that which is omnipresent. In this divine glass they see face to face; and their converse is free, as well as pure. This is the comfort of friends, that though they may be said to die, yet their friendship and society are, in the best sense, ever present, because immortal.

—William Penn¹

Edgar Allan Poe is renowned for his short fiction, which delves into the realm of terror, horror, and the fantastic. In several of his texts, protagonists grapple with these themes and their relationship with death in distinct ways. One such way that Poe creates horror through death is through an extension of life using the process of metempsychosis, thereby creating terror for both the protagonists of the text and the reader. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines metempsychosis as “the supposed transmigration at death of the soul of a human being or animal into a new body of the same or a different species.” Upon studying Poe and metempsychosis, it is clear that the root of the terror that fascinates Poe is created by exploring the humanistic fear associated with death. J.K. Rowling is another author who

¹ Originally found in *Fruits of Solitude* (qtd. in Rowling, *Deathly Hallows* XI)

has expounded upon the idea of metempsychosis and death, utilizing both to advance the plotline within her *Harry Potter* series. Rowling advanced the use of metempsychosis in contemporary literature, mirroring the horrific effects of Poe's literature through the character of Lord Voldemort. Rowling successfully engaged a new generation into a re-telling of a classic horror story that deals with the effects of the soul in both its meaning and existence.

Avoiding Death

A major theme that both Poe and Rowling deal with is the decisions their characters make to avoid death. In Poe's short story, "Morella," the narrator's life revolves around his wife and her attempt to extend her life upon dying. The actions he takes to ensure his wife's survival harken back to the definition set out by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the transfer of a soul into a *new* body (Poe, "Morella" 233).

Morella seemingly dies, but not before creating a vessel—her own daughter—to act as her new body, allowing her to continue to live. The narrator explains, with a growing sense of horror, the realization that he comes to about the identity of his daughter:

For that her smile was like her mother's I could bear; but then I shuddered at its too perfect *identity*—that her eyes were like Morella's I could endure; but then they too often looked down into the depths of my soul with Morella's own intense and bewildering meaning. And in the contour of the high forehead, and in the ringlets of the silken hair, and in the wan fingers which buried themselves therein, and in the sad musical tones of her speech, and above all—oh, above all—in the phrases and expressions of the dead on the lips of the loved and the living, I found food for consuming thought and horror—for a worm that *would* not die. (234)

This explanation of the similarities between Morella the mother and Morella the daughter cast doubt on the difference between the two women. The narrator gives no notice of Morella's pregnancy or childbirth, thus allowing readers to interpret the "birth" as a creation of another body or being through some other means. Poe also leaves the ending of the text ambiguous, with the narrator remembering the deaths of both Morellas; however, to him they are one person and not two separate beings, leaving the reader to interpret the extent of metempsychosis at play (235).

Rowling builds upon the level of metempsychosis established by Poe in “Morella” and effectively illustrates throughout the Harry Potter series the level of terror it can cause. Both Morella and Lord Voldemort actively look for ways to continue living and refuse to accept death as an absolute concept. Morella, loath to die, searches for a way to live on, ultimately prophesizing her continued existence (233). This obsession with immortality is also seen in Voldemort’s character, which Rowling builds Harry’s story around, just as Poe expands on Morella’s immortality through the experiences of the narrator. Similar to Morella, Voldemort’s methodology for avoiding death is explained through the same definition of metempsychosis in which life can be extended through the transferring of the soul to a new or different body. Voldemort’s dominating characteristic is his fear of death. Even though he is the villain of the story, without his journey to overcome mortality, Harry Potter would never have been left an orphan, and there would be no hero’s journey for him to embark on. In short, the idea of metempsychosis is what moves the story along and allows J.K. Rowling to interweave themes of good versus evil in Harry’s quest to track down Voldemort’s split soul to ultimately end this villain’s life.

The fear of death dominates the actions of Lord Voldemort as he searches for the means to overcome it. The idea of fear or terror is something that Poe greatly emphasizes as a motivation for attempting to perform acts of metempsychosis within his short stories. This attribution and Voldemort’s experimentation with metempsychosis make him one of the greatest literary villains in the 21st century. Additionally, Rowling is able to, like Poe, create a sense of terror in characters that interact with Voldemort and in her readers themselves. This sense of terror stems from the unknown results of the metempsychosis process, Voldemort’s mental connection with Harry, and his own fear of death.

Voldemort and Ligeia

Poe’s texts deal with characters who are focused on extending their lives—not to continue living, but rather to avoid dying. In “Ligeia,” the protagonist narrator is afraid of his love dying, so he goes to extreme measures to extend her life. Poe is interested in the motivations behind extending one’s life. In “Ligeia,” the main motivation that exists in

extending life is a desire lovers share in wanting to be together. Whether it is because of love or obsession, the narrator is motivated to experiment in extending the life of his once-living lover. Rowling darkens this aspect of metempsychosis and explores how fearing death can motivate one to take extreme actions, exploring the fear of death versus the fear of losing a life that many of Poe's narrators struggle with. Readers are introduced to Voldemort as a character from within the first few chapters of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, however, it isn't until Harry comes face to face with him that one recognizes metempsychosis at play.

Voldemort is assumed to be dead throughout the book, but as Harry confronts Professor Quirrell, Quirrell removes his turban revealing another face on the back of his head belonging to none other than Lord Voldemort. To Harry, Voldemort says, "See what I have become . . . Mere shadow and vapor . . . I have form only when I can share another's body . . . but there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds" (293). This passage explains Voldemort's continued existence. Even though his body and soul were separated, he was able to survive by finding another willing body to inhabit.

This is a clear instance of successful metempsychosis, much like the instance that takes place in Poe's "Ligeia." The narrator in Poe's story takes the reader through his relationship with Ligeia, who practiced witchcraft and who ultimately died. However, the narrator goes through his grief and then embarks upon his second marriage to another woman, Rowena. She then dies and the narrator expresses his horror upon hearing her revive and realizing that she is, in fact, *not* dead. The story concludes with the narrator realizing that while Rowena's body has come back to life, it is Ligeia who is actually possessing it. "And now slowly opened the eyes of the figure which stood before me. 'Here then, at least,' I shrieked aloud, 'can I never—can I never be mistaken—these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes of my lost love—of the lady of the LADY LIGEIA'" (327).

This clear example of metempsychosis reads two ways. Either Ligeia has come back, successfully inhabiting the body of Rowena, or both women end up dead. The narrator's ultimate confrontation with the lady leaves the reader assuming that metempsychosis occurred successfully, yet it still allows for the reader to interpret and decide whether Lady Ligeia continued living or not. Both readings support a narrator who

is actively seeking a way to prolong the life of Ligeia. Poe leaves an ambiguous ending, which further deepens the level of terror created by the unknown factor of the resolution and survival of Ligeia being questioned. Rowling is able to build upon this level of metempsychosis and effectively illustrate throughout the Harry Potter series by producing several instances of metempsychosis involving Voldemort, and while Harry manages to thwart him several times, the metempsychosis process is still successful in prolonging Voldemort's life.

Terror for the Reader

One of Poe's primary concerns was the intent behind the writing. He was aware of the impression his writing would have on the reader and intentionally created stories revolving around terror and horror. In his essay, "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe focuses on the effect on the reader as the main motivation for his writing process; for him, one of his goals is to have the reader experience fear through his stories and poetry. Similarly, Rowling creates a feeling of terror in the reader by showing the many characters' fear of Voldemort. In fact, the majority of Wizards that young Harry comes into contact with refuse to say his full name, referring to him as "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named" or "You-Know-Who" (Rowling, *The Sorcerer's Stone* 54). This use of ambiguity directed towards Voldemort within the wizarding world alerts readers to the potential threat he poses to the story's protagonist. While the possibility of an evil soul continuing to survive through the metempsychosis process is clearly used to create this level of fear among wizards, Harry himself begins to develop a personal relationship with Voldemort as Harry attempts to continue surviving in the wizarding world, after Voldemort fails to murder him (12). It is this personal relationship that advances the tension of the plot and allows Rowling to eventually offer a satisfying resolution to readers regarding the terror and fear Voldemort produces.

Creating a successful effect on the reader was one of Poe's main points in critiquing other authors, and this ideal influenced his own writings as he specifically focused on creating scenarios dealing with terror and fear to have a more powerful effect on the reader (Poetry Foundation). The theme of obsession with an extension of life that dominates *Harry Potter* is something that Poe also wrote about specifically in "The Facts

in the Case of M. Valdemar,” a story that follows a man who remains alive through the process of hypnosis (1230). Here Poe has striven to explore other means of immortality to shock and terrify the reader about the different possibilities that exist regarding supernatural deaths. This concept lends itself to Rowling, who similarly creates a history of other wizards who attempted to extend their lives through unorthodox methods, thus laying the groundwork allowing Voldemort to make the most advancements in this field of magic in a way which both resonates with and terrifies readers. Both Poe and Rowling utilize the common fear of death in different ways, however, both strive to create the same effect of horror within their tales. The reader is horrified and shocked with M. Valdemar and his eventual death similarly to the reaction of readers to Voldemort’s overarching fear of death and his attempts to avoid it at all costs. Just when the narrator thinks M. Valdemar has succeeded in living past death, his body dissolves, leaving a clear and horrifying death for the readers to come to terms with. This same feeling of horror and terror is found throughout *Harry Potter* as readers learn about Voldemort’s past and the murders he commits in order to split his soul and prolong his life (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows* 498).

Metempsychosis and the Soul

Rowling allows for several different instances of metempsychosis to occur, creating opposition for Harry as Voldemort continues to return to life again and again. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Harry is confronted with a schoolboy version of Lord Voldemort who, after possessing a female student, prepares to unleash a basilisk upon Hogwarts (312). This book exudes even more of Poe’s influence as Lord Voldemort reveals his name to be an anagram of Tom Marvolo Riddle (314). Poe utilizes anagrams in his tale “The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq. Late Editor of the ‘Goosetherumfoodle’” to make a deeper connection creating a doubling theme between his characters (Pollin 30). The use of an anagram within the story builds up a sense of foreshadowing that gives the reader a deeper sense of satisfaction upon the unveiling of the anagram. After Voldemort reveals himself as Tom Marvolo Riddle, Harry ultimately is able to thwart his return by killing the basilisk and destroying the journal that Voldemort’s soul was tethered to (332). Even

though Harry is victorious, only a piece of Voldemort's soul is destroyed rather than his soul in its entirety. Rowling elaborates on this concept and how it plays into Voldemort's demise in the seventh book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Rowling uses bookworm character Hermione to explain the concept behind metempsychosis, of why souls can survive without a person's body but that they need to be housed in another body in order to continue existing. "My point is that whatever happens to your body, your soul will survive, untouched," said Hermione. "But it's the other way round with a Horcrux. The fragment of soul inside it depends on its container, its enchanted body, for survival. It can't exist without it" (104).

This explanation of a soul's survival works with Poe's interpretation of metempsychosis within his story "Morella." In "Morella," there is a transfer of a soul into a new body or vessel. The narrator's wife, Morella, dies, but leaves behind a daughter. However, Poe leaves this open to interpretation as to whether or not it is her daughter through natural birth, or if it is a vessel that Morella is then able to come back later and possess, thereby restoring her to life as her soul exits from one body and into another. Morella's husband is with her as she utters her last words, ultimately prophesying her continued living state. "I kissed her forehead, and she continued: 'I am dying, yet shall I live.' 'Morella!' The days have never been when thou couldst love me—but her whom in life thou didst abhor, in death thou shalt adore" (226). The prophecy of life indicates that the extension of life isn't one by accident but a purposeful incident of metempsychosis.

Another important element to the theory of metempsychosis that Voldemort engages in is the transfer of his soul into that of a living animal. It is clear throughout the series that Voldemort and his snake, Nagini, share an unusually close bond (*Goblet of Fire* 13). This bond generates from the fact that she is also one of his Horcruxes (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows* 647). Rowling writes that the transfer of part of the soul into another living thing, like an animal, is incredibly unstable. The instability enables Harry to defeat Voldemort once and for all which brings to light the question of whether or not metempsychosis was in actuality successful. While it permitted Voldemort to live another 17 years from his original death date, he was still rendered incapable of living forever. Here, Rowling differs from Poe, who leaves his conclusions full of ambiguity in favor of a precise conclusion where her protagonist can gain closure and the reader can fully interpret what has taken place.

The Double in Rowling and Poe

The connection that Harry and Voldemort share speaks to Poe's influence regarding the terror that develops in his texts revolving around the splitting of the soul, resulting in a theme of doubling. The idea of the double is most strongly developed in Poe's tale, "William Wilson." The story revolves around the narrator, who calls himself William Wilson, and his perceived struggle with his connected foe, who shares the same name of William Wilson. The narrator's struggle is similar to Harry's as they both deal with the sharing of a mind with another: Harry with Lord Voldemort, and the narrator with William Wilson. While Poe's tale leaves the true identity of the double ambiguous, Rowling builds on the connection between doubles to deepen the conflict between Harry and Voldemort. The theme of the double is most prevalent in the fifth installment of the series when Harry recognizes the traits he and Voldemort share in addition to the mind connection they have. The sense of terror the narrator experiences meeting his double, William Wilson, throughout his life is what Harry goes through when he discovers the mental connection with Voldemort. Upon the conclusion of "William Wilson," Poe effectively illustrates the possibility of killing a part of one's soul, however, this act has irrevocable consequences and alters the narrator's core identity (447-448). Similar to the narrator, Voldemort successfully kills a part of himself in order to create his new "body." Ultimately, this strengthens the double connection that Harry and Voldemort share, deepening the bond through blood. Harry discovers the connection highlighting the doubling element that exists between his and Voldemort's lives (*The Goblet of Fire* 642). Similar to William Wilson, Voldemort is terrified of Harry because of the similarities between them and Harry's "destiny" to one day end Voldemort's life. Additionally, Harry, like the narrator in William Wilson, eventually needs to kill off the shared soul between him and Voldemort. Unlike William Wilson though, Harry survives the encounter and is able to walk away unscathed, while the narrator struggles to move past his decision to kill off a part of himself.

The origin of the double in *Harry Potter* is found in Voldemort's relationship with metempsychosis and the success he finds enabling him to continue living. Rowling begins to elaborate more on Voldemort's life and the way he came to successfully manage metempsychosis in *Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince*. Here Rowling introduces

Horcruxes as a means to accomplish metempsychosis. In Poe's "Ligeia" in order for metempsychosis to occur, another needed to die, so that the soul could live on. Similarly, in order for Lord Voldemort to split his soul, he needed to commit murder each time (*Deathly Hallows* 104). Terror is amplified by the added number of Horcruxes Voldemort created, deepening the fear of metempsychosis due to its connection to murder and immortality.

Conclusion

The theme of terror permeates both Poe's and Rowling's fiction, even though Rowling strives to counterbalance this with strong themes of love and friendship that bring the other characters together. While love exists in Poe's texts—specifically between Ligeia and the narrator, his main focus is the theme of death and terror. Poe's fascination with death is evident in the treatment of it in his texts. He pushes the boundaries between reality and truth by writing about metempsychosis and the extended life it enables. Poe utilizes metempsychosis as a supernatural element allowing him to change the reader's expectations when it came to the notion of "death," while Rowling creates a literary world in which metempsychosis occurs, utilizing it as a literary device that develops and advances her protagonist, Harry Potter, on his hero's journey. The fundamentality of metempsychosis in both the works of Poe and Rowling gives further credit to Poe and his understanding of what processes could effectively produce terror in the reader.

Rowling certainly advances the idea of metempsychosis throughout her story and utilizes it as a tool to create conflict and a driving need for love and acceptance of death. The terror surrounding death that she preys on to create her story comes into conflict with the idealistic view of living forever, which Rowling proves can also be something terrifying. Both Rowling and Poe play with different expectations and understandings regarding death. While Poe fails to offer a resolution to appease readers of this fear, Rowling does exactly that with the over-arching theme of love allowing good to triumph over evil. Rather than take away from the metempsychosis within the story, it re-iterates its fundamental role in the plot, allowing Rowling to orchestrate conflict and then resolve it through Harry's unique perspective and understanding of death.

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