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Otherness and Identity
- An Existential Analysis of *Harry Potter*

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1. Introduction

Even in the magical world of Harry Potter, the problems of reality are constantly lurking behind Hogwarts’ enchanted castle walls. In her famous series about the young wizard, J. K. Rowling deals with existential issues that are as significant in the magical world as they are in ours. Just like existential philosophers, she explores the jagged line between good and evil, the meaning of life, the inevitability of death and the importance of our choices and actions in the construction of our true identities. Although Rowling’s novels are essentially aimed for children and young adults and cannot be categorised as “existential” literature as such, the Harry Potter series contains traces of many of the concepts that are pivotal to existentialism in general and Jean-Paul Sartre’s theories in particular. In my analysis of identity construction in the Harry Potter series, I will use Sartre’s concept of otherness to investigate how the protagonist, Harry Potter, and the antagonist, Lord Voldemort, relate to different forms of otherness and how this shapes their separate identities. I will argue that Harry’s and Voldemort’s diverging attitudes towards otherness affect the construction of their identities. While Harry’s acceptance of the freedom and agency of Others makes him a noble hero, Voldemort’s denial of the Others’ freedom shapes his identity as an evil villain.

2. Aim and Approach

According to David E. Cooper’s guide to existentialism, the term ‘existentialism’ emerged at the end of World War II as a label for Jean-Paul Sartre’s and Simone de Beauvoir’s ideas and was subsequently applied to more traditional philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche (1–2). As Sartre notes, existentialism can be split into two branches, Christian and atheistic existentialism (Existentialism is a Humanism 20). Since there is no mention of religion in Harry Potter, I have decided to focus on Sartre’s approach to atheistic existentialism. As its name suggests, existentialism deals with different aspects of human existence. Its first principle, from Sartre’s perspective, is that “existence precedes essence” (22). This means that man exists as nothing before the essence of what he is can be defined; it is his choices and actions, what he “wills himself to be”, that defines his identity (22). In her dissertation on Sartre and Levinas, Jennifer E. Rosato describes how man is “at every moment only what he makes of himself” (148). Furthermore, as David and Catherine Deavel
notes in an essay on the nature of evil in *Harry Potter*, “an individual’s choice for good or a choice for evil shapes this person and brings lasting consequences for oneself and for others” (Deavel 146).

To a large extent, identity construction in *Harry Potter* adheres to this principle, and in this analysis, Sartre’s concept of otherness will be used to illustrate how Harry’s and Voldemort’s attitudes affect their choices for good or evil, and consequently, their identities. According to Sartre, the Other is “the radical negation of my experience” (*Being and Nothingness* 252). In other words, the Other is anything or anyone that I am not (254). In this analysis the concept of the Other will be applied to Harry and Voldemort in relation to each other, but also to other people around them. Sartre claims that the presence and the ‘Look’ of the Other contribute to an awareness of the self: not until a person is subject to the Other’s Look can he “realise fully all the structures of [his] being” (246). To explain this “Look”, Sartre describes a person who observes a scene through a keyhole, so far unaware of himself (283). As soon as he hears footsteps behind him, he realises that he is not alone and he becomes aware of himself because someone is looking at him (284). He feels ashamed, because suddenly he exists not only for himself, but also for the Other who can judge his actions (246). Furthermore, the Look is a threat to his freedom because the Look “threatens to reduce” him to a mere object for the Look (Cooper 186; 105).

For Sartre, the natural reaction of self-defence to the Look is “a refusal of the Other” to certify one’s own “subjectivity” against him (105). To put it more simply, man struggles not to become an object for the Other by refusing the Other’s freedom. In the first part of this analysis I will discuss Harry and Voldemort as each other’s Other, a relationship that is characterised by a neglect of the Other’s freedom through hate or indifference. In the second part I will show how the character’s attitudes towards other Others differ, by placing Harry’s friendship in contrast to Voldemort’s oppression. Here, I will include Sartre’s ideas of a positive attitude towards Others that make profitable, non-threatening relationships with Others possible. In the final part, I will analyse Harry’s and Voldemort’s attitudes towards death. Sartre explains death as a “transformation of the whole person into otherness” (*Notebooks for an Ethics* 48). Death is, in other words, not merely a threat to one’s freedom, but “the very elimination of it” (Gordon 104).
3. Previous Research and Material

Since *The Philosopher’s Stone* was published in 1997, the *Harry Potter* novels have been devoured by many millions of readers all over the world. Their popularity has also resulted in an extensive amount of scholarly research. However, despite the abundance of critical material, existentialism has not been widely used as a critical approach to *Harry Potter*. Two works analyse *Harry Potter* from an existential perspective: Convey Jordan Green’s master thesis *Harry Potter and Existentialism*, and Nichole LeFebvre’s academic article “The Sorcerer’s Stone, Mirror of Erised, and Horcruxes: Choice, Individuality, and Authenticity in Harry Potter”. However, neither of them deal with existential otherness: instead, they both focus on Sartre’s concepts of good and bad faith. The subjects of my analysis will be the Bloomsbury editions of the seven *Harry Potter* novels. As a theoretical foundation I will use Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, as well as two of his later works, *Existentialism is a Humanism* and *Notebooks for an Ethics*. Apart from this, other works that explain Sartre’s approach to existentialism have helped me achieve a wider and more contextual perspective of his theories, the most significant of these being David E. Cooper’s *Existentialism* and Jennifer E. Rosato’s *Opening Oneself to an Other: Sartre's and Levinas' Phenomenological Ethics*.

4. Analysis

4.1. Harry and Voldemort as Each Other’s Others

4.1.1. Harry: Hate and Dissociation

Ever since he was a baby, Harry has been affected by Voldemort’s presence. Voldemort murdered Harry’s parents, which in turn has forced Harry to grow up with his aunt and her family, who he has bullied him and kept him unaware of the magical world (*Chamber of Secrets* 9). After learning that it was Voldemort who killed his parents, Harry starts “to get a prickle of fear every time [he is] mentioned” (*Philosopher’s Stone* 187). During a detention in the forest at Hogwarts, Harry comes across a hooded figure feeding on unicorn blood. The figure immediately raises its head to look straight at Harry, who is terrified and unable to move (187). However, Harry does not realise who it is until after the figure is driven away by a centaur, and at the realisation of just having met Voldemort, he feels “as though an iron fist had
clenched suddenly around [his] heart” (189). According to Sartre, it is only after a person becomes aware of the Look of the Other that he can discern the Other’s actual presence (Cooper 105). It is not the pair of eyes that catches the person’s attention, but rather the sense of being watched. In his meeting with Voldemort in the forest, Harry first becomes aware of Voldemort’s Look before becoming fully aware of Voldemort as the Other that looks at him.

In a sense, Harry’s scar works as a constant reminder of the danger that Voldemort’s existence poses. When Harry, as a baby, is almost killed by Voldemort, the unsuccessful killing curse leaves a scar on his forehead; in a sense, Harry is marked by the Look (Philosopher’s Stone 45). Although their actual meetings are few and brief, the scar reminds Harry of Voldemort’s existence and the danger and uneasiness that it entails. After their meeting in the forest, the scar on Harry’s forehead even starts to hurt, which Harry interprets as a sign of danger (192). Sartre notes how the Other is realised through a feeling of uneasiness and an awareness that through the Other one is “perpetually in danger” (Being and Nothingness 299). Sartre further claims that once noticed, “the Other is present everywhere”, just like Voldemort is for Harry (301; Cooper 105). The scar also symbolises another important connection between the two characters. As Dumbledore explains in The Deathly Hallows, a fragment of Voldemort’s soul resides in Harry since the first time he tried to kill him, and this gives Harry occasional accesses to Voldemort’s mind (555). The fact that Harry and Voldemort can look into each other’s minds further illustrates the ever-present Look of the Other.

However, Harry resents everything that ties him to Voldemort. He hates the fact that Voldemort can see into his mind, and when Harry suspects being possessed by Voldemort he feels “dirty, contaminated, as though he were carrying some deadly germ” (193; Order of the Phoenix 435). Hate, Sartre declares, is characterised by a renunciation of any association with the Other and a struggle towards the “realisation of a world in which the Other does not exist” (Being and Nothingness 432). Harry’s repugnance towards any connection with Voldemort and his struggle to defeat him are clear illustrations of Sartre’s theories. In The Chamber of Secrets, Voldemort points out the “strange likenesses” between him and Harry: “Both half-blood, orphans, raised by Muggles. Probably the only two Parselmouths¹ to come to Hogwarts since

¹ Wizards who can communicate with snakes.
the great Slytherin himself” (233). Sartre claims that the presence of another person evokes shame, which is basically the recognition “that I am as the Other sees me” (Being and Nothingness 246). For Harry, the hate and shame that Voldemort provokes come to affect his choices and actions, and consequently, according to Sartre’s first principle of existentialism, what Harry makes of himself. When he recognises that Voldemort’s perception of him is correct, he reacts by doing everything in his power to dissociate himself from Voldemort and eliminate any dark traits in himself.

Because of his hate for Voldemort, Harry continuously chooses and acts as Voldemort would not. A first example of this is when Harry “chooses” to be in the Gryffindor house although the Sorting Hat points out that Slytherin could help him “on the way to greatness” (Philosopher’s Stone 91). As Dumbledore remarks, much in line with existential reasoning, it is “our choices […] that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities” (Chamber of Secrets 245). Throughout the novels, Harry’s choices demonstrate his good nature: from his decision to befriend Ron and Hermione, despite Malfoy’s warning not to make friends with “the wrong sort” to his determination to keep fighting evil by becoming an Auror, a professional dark wizard hunter (Philosopher’s Stone 81; Order of the Phoenix 583). Similarly, Harry’s respect for other beings forms a sharp contrast to Voldemort’s indifference. While Voldemort “refuses to feel remorse” and talks about murdering the innocent “with amusement”, Harry avoids harming even Voldemort’s followers with the explanation that he won’t “blast people out of [his] way just because they’re there […]. That’s Voldemort’s job” (Green 56; Deathly Hallows 64). By dissociating himself from Voldemort’s evil actions, Harry creates and reinforces his own good and heroic identity.

4.1.2. Voldemort: Indifference and Egocentrism

Voldemort is also affected by the threatening presence of Harry as his Other. He first becomes aware of the supposed threat that Harry poses through a prophecy that mentions “[t]he one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord […] born as the seventh month dies” (Order of the Phoenix 741). Although Harry is only a baby, and not the only one who fits the prophecy’s description, Voldemort decides to kill him before he has even seen him (726). This corresponds with the notion that an awareness of the Look precedes an awareness of the Other as a being, but it also fits the claim that the Other is realised through a feeling of uneasiness and a sense of constant danger. It is worth noting here that for Sartre, the Look is not necessarily a
real world event but rather a constantly present “experience of the Other” (Rosato 79-80). Thus, the mere awareness of Harry as a threat is equivalent to the awareness of being looked at, and his existence poses a perpetual threat to Voldemort from beginning to end. (*Being and Nothingness* 285).

At the same time, Voldemort’s attitude towards Harry is distinguished by indifference and neglect of this threat. As Sartre makes clear throughout his works, denial of something is essentially a confession of it, and although Voldemort learns that Harry’s mother provided her son with a magical protection when she died for him, he continuously denies this magical power and never figures out the real reason for Harry’s survival (*Being and Nothingness* 71; *Goblet of Fire* 566). During the fight between Harry and Voldemort in *The Chamber of Secrets*, Voldemort asserts that “a lucky chance” saved Harry when he was a baby (233). In *The Deathly Hallows*, he maintains that Harry is alive “due more to my errors, than to his triumphs” (13). Keeping Voldemort’s usual abundance of self-righteousness in mind, this clearly demonstrates his reluctance to acknowledge Harry’s power. Later in the same novel, Voldemort admits that Harry has exceeded his expectations, but he still refuses to believe that Harry will be able to harm him any further (515). He taunts Harry’s “one great flaw”, the fact that Harry reveals himself just to stop the war and prevent his friends from dying. Voldemort never realises that what he considers a flaw is, as will be argued later, Harry’s greatest strength: the ability to feel love and pain and the fact that he has something meaningful to fight for (*Order of the Phoenix* 726; *Deathly Hallows* 525).

Despite Voldemort’s and Harry’s equally hostile attitudes, their motives for the rivalry are significantly different. While Harry’s hate is a result of Voldemort’s evil deeds towards him, Voldemort’s obsession to kill Harry is rather a reaction of his fear of the power and freedom that Harry possesses. In *The Half-Blood Prince*, Voldemort himself states that “[g]reatness inspires envy” and “envy engenders spite” (415). Although, he refers to his own “greatness” here, his jealousy and fear of Harry’s superiority obviously cause “spite” and evil. Harry fights to save himself or others, while the only motives behind Voldemort’s fight are his obsession to be the most powerful wizard and his resolution to eradicate any obstacle to reach that goal. As Dumbledore observes, Voldemort kills “not for revenge, but for gain” (411). For Harry, defeating Voldemort is a necessary evil to save the world, whereas for
Voldemort, destroying Harry is just another selfish step in the evil pursuit of taking possession of it.

In fact, Voldemort’s egocentric and indifferent attitude is the root of his evil identity. Never, throughout the seven novels, does Voldemort fully acknowledge Harry as a worthy enemy. Even in the moments prior to his own death, Voldemort calls Harry “the boy who survived by accident” (Deathly Hallows 591). According to Sartre, “indifference towards others” is a kind of blindness towards the Other, a way of hiding the knowledge of the Other’s Look from oneself (Being and Nothingness 402). From this perspective, Voldemort is unaware of the impact that Harry’s Look or freedom can have (402). His egocentrism almost verges on a sort of “solipsism”, which, for Sartre, is a result of his indifferent attitude, where Others are viewed as mere “objects” or “functions” rather than free beings (402-3). While Harry is reluctant to “let anybody [...] stand between him and Voldemort”, Voldemort does not care about the sufferings of other people (Half-Blood Prince 601). Since he neglects the Other’s Look, he feels no shame (Being and Nothingness 403). Indeed, Voldemort seems to lack any trace of shame or remorse in his cold-hearted attitude in general and in his last battle with Harry in particular (Deathly Hallows 595). In Harry Potter and Existentialism, Green claims that it is above all through his lack of remorse that Voldemort creates “his evil identity” (56). In conclusion, Voldemort’s egocentrism is what makes him so evil: he chooses only what is best for himself because of his ignorance of how Others are affected by his actions and choices.

4.2. Attitudes Towards Other Others

4.2.1. Harry: Generosity and Friendship

While the relationship between Harry and Voldemort is characterised by hostility, Harry’s general attitude towards other Others is fundamentally different. Harry and Voldemort both grew up as unloved orphans without positive relationships, but while Voldemort retains his indifference, Harry discovers friendship and love when he is introduced to the magical world (Philosopher’s Stone 27; 81). As Rosato points out, Sartre’s Notebooks for an Ethics presents an attitude of generosity towards the Other, where the Look is no longer seen as a threat (96-97). By recognising the Other’s freedom instead of denying it, and by sharing the struggles and goals of Others, one acquires a “new understanding” of Others as “free individuals” to work alongside
with, rather than as “threatening obstacles” to tackle (172-3; Notebooks for an Ethics 283). When Harry meets people who are kind to him, and whose existence are therefore not seen as a threat to his freedom, this understanding helps him form relationships of friendship and love instead of animosity. Ron and Hermione are his most significant companions, and it is through a common struggle that the trio is first united: “There are some things you can’t share without ending up liking each other, and knocking out a twelve-foot mountain troll is one of them” (Philosopher’s Stone 132). In line with Sartre’s theories, it is by sharing each other’s goals and struggles, whether it is astronomy homework or defeating evil, that Harry and his friends can build positive relationships free from hate and indifference.

As a matter of fact, Harry’s attitude helps him both concretely in his battle against evil and more abstractly in the construction of his own identity. During the final battle against Voldemort, the awareness of people dying around him threatens to engulf Harry, who is unable to ward off the Dementors' surrounding him. However, when Luna reminds him that there are people left to keep fighting for, he finally gathers the strength to repel the Dementors (Deathly Hallows 522). Sartre explains that in a positive relationship, the Other can give an additional meaning to one’s existence (Notebook for an Ethics 499-500). The power of Luna’s words is a good example of how friendship gives Harry something meaningful to fight for. In addition, Harry’s attitude helps him create and maintain his identity as a hero. For Sartre, conversion to a positive attitude entails a realisation that there is no static identity: man can only posses certain qualities as long as they are what he chooses to make of himself (Rosato 148). “[T]he hero makes himself heroic: there is always the possibility that one day […] [he] may cease to be a hero” (Existentialism is a Humanism 39). Although people already view Harry as a hero and expect “great things from him” because he escaped Voldemort’s curse, he insists that he is not special: “I’m famous and I can’t even remember what I’m famous for” (Philosopher’s Stone 65-66; Chamber of Secrets 43). Instead of imagining himself to be statically “heroic” because of his past, Harry realises that the only way to live up to other people’s expectations of him is to keep struggling towards that goal.

The importance of friendship is perhaps especially evident when Harry is on the verge of losing it. Far from everyone at Hogwarts likes him, and according to

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2 Magical creatures that “drain peace, hope and happiness out of the air around them” (Prisoner of Azkaban 140)
Sartre, a positive relationship can only last as long as it is maintained from both parts (Rosato 99). During his years at Hogwarts, Harry is, for instance, wrongly suspected of being the heir of Slytherin and accused of cheating his way into the Triwizard Tournament as well as lying about Voldemort’s return (Chamber of Secrets 148; Goblet of Fire 260; Order of the Phoenix 196). It is evident from Harry’s reactions to these accusations that when Others doubt him and revert to a negative attitude, their Look becomes a threat for him again. He is “sick of being the person who is stared at and talked about all time” and at one point he even uses his invisibility cloak to escape the Looks of the Others (Order of the Phoenix 196; Goblet of Fire 279). In The Deathly Hallows, Harry’s and Ron’s friendship is put to a test when the unsuccessful hunt for Horcruxes³ causes a serious argument between them. From an existential perspective, they both have trouble accepting each other’s freedom. Harry is jealous that Ron and Hermione have the freedom to “walk away” from the mission while he cannot (Deathly Hallows 229). Ron, on the other hand, reproaches Harry for his disappointing leadership and lack of plan, which, in essence, is equivalent to Harry’s freedom to choose their path without an idea of where it might lead them (252). Their positive attitudes are replaced by “a corrosive hatred”, and Ron runs away, leaving Harry with an overwhelming hopelessness (254; 257).

Nevertheless, Harry’s positive attitude eventually helps him overcome conflicts and restore his positive relationships. By continuously choosing and acting generously and heroically, he regains the Others’ trust and support. When Harry has saved Ginny from Voldemort, he is celebrated and no longer suspected of being the heir of Slytherin, and after he gets through the first dangerous task in the Triwizard Tournament, the other students start supporting him again (Chamber of Secrets 249; Goblet of Fire 315). In his last encounter with Voldemort, Harry even attempts to convert to an attitude of generosity towards his worst enemy. When Harry and Voldemort circles each other, exposed to each Other’s Looks, Harry says: “[...] before you try to kill me, I’d advise you to think about what you’ve done... think, and try for some remorse” (Deathly Hallows 594). As Hermione has explained earlier, showing true remorse is the only way to put a damaged soul back together (89). Thus, Harry acknowledges Voldemort’s freedom by offering him a chance to save his own shattered soul. Consequently, he modifies his own goal to include Voldemort’s wish

³ In an attempt to attain immortality, Voldemort has hidden fragments of his own soul in objects known as Horcruxes (Deathly Hallows 467).
to survive: instead of destroying Voldemort, he fights for everyone’s freedom. His ability to show such respect for his archenemy truly reveals the essence of Harry’s noble and heroic identity.

4.2.2. Voldemort: Neglect and Oppression

While Harry’s positive attitude towards Others helps him in his struggle, Voldemort’s corresponding indifference becomes an obstacle. In *The Half-Blood Prince*, the differences between the two characters become especially clear when Dumbledore shows Harry old memories of Voldemort to help him gain a deeper understanding of his enemy (187). When Harry is first told that he is a wizard, he reacts with doubt and uncertainty (*Philosopher’s Stone* 47). Voldemort, on the other hand, tells Dumbledore that he “knew” he was “different” and “special” (*Half-Blood Prince* 254). More than fifty years later he still regards himself as “the greatest wizard of them all”, “the most powerful” and the “most important and precious” (*Deathly Hallows* 443). Voldemort’s attitude, both as a child and as an adult, is characterised by indifference. Voldemort imagines qualities such as greatness, superiority and power to be static parts of his identity. He does not realise that he can never be the greatest and most powerful wizard in the world until he makes himself be just that by surpassing all others. Consequently, Voldemort’s indifference causes him to neglect the threat that Others pose, and this is the main reason for his recurrent defeats. For instance, one of his Horcruxes is discovered and destroyed because a house-elf manages to escape from the cave where it is hidden. As Hermione points out, “Voldemort would have considered the ways of house-elves far beneath his notice, [...] it would never have occurred to him that they might have magic that he didn’t” (*Deathly Hallows* 161). More than once, Voldemort’s inability to acknowledge the freedom of Others and take their power seriously turns out to have disastrous consequences for him.

Apart from underestimating Others’ power against him, Voldemort also fails to see the potential that a positive attitude towards Others could have for him. As Dumbledore states, Voldemort is “woefully ignorant” of the power of love (*Half-Blood Prince* 415). His refusal to convert to a positive attitude towards Others makes him oblivious to the benefits that love and friendship would entail. Instead of struggling together with people in a positive relationship where trust and loyalty can be taken for granted, he relies on people to be loyal “out of fear” and takes their “stupidity and carelessness” only as a proof of “how unwise it [is], ever, to trust”
In fact, Voldemort has “never had a friend, nor [...] ever wanted one”, and his followers, the Death Eaters, are nothing but servants for him (Half-Blood Prince 260). Like all Others for Voldemort, they are viewed merely as “functions” or obstacles rather than as free individuals (Being and nothingness 402). This view is illustrated in The Goblet of Fire when Voldemort laughs at Wormtail, who hopes that Voldemort will heal the hand he has just sacrificed to help his master return (559). Without even thanking him for cutting off a part of his body, Voldemort inflicts even more pain by touching Wormtail’s Dark Mark, “ignoring [his] uncontrollable weeping” (560). Here, it becomes clear just how selfish and devoid of sympathy Voldemort is. For him, Wormtail is nothing but a means to greater power.

Voldemort’s denial of Others’ freedom reaches its peak in his relation to Muggles and Muggleborn wizards. Since childhood, Voldemort’s actions and choices have contributed to the shaping of his evil identity. At the age of eleven, he was “already using magic against other people, to frighten, to punish, to control” and Dumbledore points out the young Voldemort’s “obvious instincts for cruelty, secrecy and domination” (Half-Blood Prince 259). While still a Hogwarts student, he murdered his father and grandparents, who were all Muggles, and fifty years later his intolerance grows into a full-blown racist regime when Voldemort takes over the Ministry of Magic (343; Deathly Hallows 133). He oppresses Muggles and Muggleborns, and wants to “cut away the canker that infects us until only those of true blood remain” (17). Being a half-blood himself, he is oblivious to the fact that “the canker” he wants to “cut away” would include himself. Sartre claims that “[w]hat I aim at the Other is nothing more than what I find in myself”, and Voldemort’s oppression is a way of projecting the qualities that he does not want to recognise in himself onto the Other. His contempt of the impurity of his own blood causes him to project his own supposed inferiority onto Muggles and Muggleborns (Being and Nothingness 250). Even the act of calling himself Lord Voldemort is an attempt to deny his half-blood identity by rejecting his “filthy Muggle father’s name” (Chamber of Secrets 231).

Finally, Voldemort’s negative attitude results in a vicious circle, which can only end in equally negative relationships with Others. As Dumbledore explains to Harry, “Voldemort created his worst enemy, just as tyrants everywhere do! Have you any idea how much tyrants fear the people they oppress? All of them realise that one
day, amongst their many victims, there is sure to be one who rises against them and strikes back!” (Half-Blood Prince 477). From an existential point of view, oppression and racism are in essence fear of one’s own otherness. As Sartre states: “In oppression I am afraid of myself as Other” (Notebooks for an Ethics 71). While Voldemort’s indifference implies a repression of his fear through a denial of the Other’s freedom, his oppression is a concrete attempt to actually restrict the Other’s freedom and power (Anderson 81). By trying to control and exterminate the Muggles and Muggleborns through every means from Ministry reforms and Hogwarts admittance policies to downright executions, Voldemort oppresses Others to avoid being oppressed by them (Deathly Hallows 173). However, just like Harry’s respect for Others causes them to respect him back, Voldemort’s negative attitude is reciprocated by those around him. When Harry is thought to be dead, Hogwarts is still full of people prepared to continue his fight, but when Voldemort is killed, the Death Eaters that are not captured flee: the battle ends with Voldemort’s last breath (584; 596). In conclusion, Voldemort creates his own obstacles by turning people who could have been helpful friends into frightened servants or hateful enemies.

4.3. The Otherness of Death

4.3.1. Harry: Altruism and Acceptance

Despite their rivalry, Harry and Voldemort share the enemy of death. During his first year at Hogwarts, Harry discovers the Mirror of Erised, which shows the viewer his deepest desire (Philosopher’s Stone 157). Seeing his dead parents in the mirror provokes a “terrible kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness” (153)”. Harry becomes obsessed by the illusion of his parents being alive to the point where nothing else matters: the only thought in his head is “to get back in front of the mirror” (154; 156). Only when Dumbledore confronts him and advises him not to “dwell on dreams and forget to live” does he decide to forget about the mirror (157). However, in The Deathly Hallows Harry is once again engulfed by the obsession of overcoming death. After discovering the story of the Deathly Hallows and finding the phrase “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death” engraved on his parents’ grave, the idea of mastering death has “taken possession of him” (Deathly Hallows 269; 352). The belief and longing “consume him” until he feels alienated from Ron
and Hermione, and Ron has to remind him that they are supposed to fight Voldemort, not conquer death (353).

However, what Harry fears the most is the death of those he loves. According to Sartre, man is fundamentally “the desire to be” and the wish to hold on to life causes him to feel anguish before death (Being and Nothingness 585-6). In reaction to this anguish he can either flee or “throw [himself] resolutely into it” (585). The “terrible kind of ache” that Harry feels when looking into the mirror of Erised is a clear example of this anguish. However, fleeing the anguish of his own death is not the principal goal for Harry’s obsession. Although he is at times scared of his own death, it is before the death of Others that his anguish becomes the most evident. When Sirius dies Harry is left with “a terrible hollow inside him” (Order of the Phoenix 723). The anguish even causes him to ask Nearly Headless Nick if Sirius can come back as a ghost (758-9). When Ron’s brother Fred is killed, Harry’s mind is “in freefall, spinning out of control, unable to grasp the impossibility, because Fred Weasley could not be dead, the evidence of all his senses must be lying” (Deathly Hallows 513). The fact that he tries to find solutions to evade or invalidate death clearly shows Harry’s altruistic unwillingness to face the death of Others, which once again distinguishes him from Voldemort. While Harry would do anything to bring his parents and loved ones back from death, there is, as Dumbledore points out, no one that Voldemort, with his lack of love, would have liked to bring back from death (577). There is a crucial difference between Voldemort’s egocentric struggle towards immortality and Harry’s wish for Others to live again.

In a sense, Harry’s altruism helps him cope with his fear of death and concentrate on his mission to defeat Voldemort. In his first year at Hogwarts, Harry claims that “anyone” would want “a stone that makes gold and stops you ever dying” (Philosopher’s Stone 161). However, when he manages to get the Philosopher’s Stone out of the Mirror of Erised to prevent Voldemort from laying hands on it, it is because he only wants to “find the Stone – find it, but not use it” (217). Several years later, Dumbledore asks Harry: “Have you any idea how few wizards could have seen what you saw in the mirror?” (Half-Blood Prince 478). This shows not only how Harry’s will to choose the good is stronger than his desire for immortality but also how special that makes him. From an existential perspective, Harry’s choice is a step towards the realisation that he is not only responsible for himself, but for everyone. For Sartre, the choices that make a person be what he is concern not only himself but all mankind
(Existentialism is a Humanism 23-4). When Harry prevents Voldemort from gaining immortality, he chooses to protect not only himself but everyone who could be a target for Voldemort's evil actions. In The Deathly Hallows, Dobby’s death reminds Harry of his responsibility for Others and helps him let go of his obsession to master death: “he no longer burned with that weird, obsessive longing. Loss and fear had snuffed it out: he felt as though he had been slapped awake again” (387). When reminded of the many lives that could rely on the outcome of his fight with Voldemort, Harry manages to prioritise the pursuit of Horcruxes over the search for Hallows, and consequently, chooses the attempt to protect all Others instead of trying to revive those he love but who are already lost (392).

In the end, Harry’s friendship and love is what helps him face and accept death. Throughout all the seven novels, Harry struggles with his responsibility. At times it causes him to reject the help of Others in an attempt to protect them, like when he tries to prevent Ron and Hermione from joining his quest for Horcruxes (84). Eventually, however, when they remind him how important it is to fight together, he is persuaded to let them help: “The measures they had taken to protect their families made him realise, more than anything else could have done, that they really were going to come with him and that they knew exactly how dangerous that would be. He wanted to tell them what that meant to him, but he simply could not find words important enough” (86). According to Sartre, a positive relationship with Others can help man avoid the anxiety of his responsibility, and as Harry comes to realise, this is what helps him cope with both responsibility and death (Notebooks for an Ethics 130). When Harry realises that he cannot survive if Voldemort is to be conquered, he pulls himself together: “he must be like Dumbledore, keep a cool head, make sure there were back-ups, others to carry on” (Deathly Hallows 558). After leaving Neville the task to kill Voldemort’s last Horcrux, Harry sacrifices himself for all Others by letting Voldemort try to kill him (558; 564). Thus, by realising his responsibility, and by accepting to share it with Others even if it involves risking both their lives and his own, Harry accepts death.

4.3.2. Voldemort: Fear and Escapism

While Harry comes to terms with his own mortality, Voldemort would go to any lengths to escape death. Even before Voldemort’s last year at Hogwarts, he “was doing all he could to find out how to make himself immortal” (Half-Blood Prince
Voldemort's quest for immortality is drawn to the point where there is almost nothing left of him to protect. A Horcrux is created by killing, “the supreme act of evil”, and serves to keep “part of the self hidden and safe”, but with the price of “ripping the soul apart” (465; 468). Voldemort’s soul is ripped into eight pieces: he creates six Horcruxes knowingly, and one unknowingly in Harry the first time he tries to kill him. As Voldemort tells Harry in *The Goblet of Fire*, he was “ripped from [his] body […] less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost […] as powerless as the weakest creature alive” (567). With only an eighth of his soul left, he was “forcing” himself “sleeplessly, endlessly, second by second, to exist” (567). When Voldemort returns as a parasite on Professor Quirrel’s head in *The Philosopher’s Stone* he drinks unicorn blood to stay alive (187). As the centaur Firenze explains, “[o]nly one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. [I]t will keep you alive even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenceless to save yourself and you will have but a half life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips” (188). Here, Voldemort’s choice to reduce himself to almost nothing, and then curse what is left of himself even further, is a clear demonstration of his desperate fear of death.

The choices that Voldemort make in his struggle towards immortality are also important building stones in the construction of his evil identity. It has been demonstrated above how Voldemort’s fear of Others leads to ignorance and downright oppression of Others. When it comes to the otherness of death, it is even more evident how Voldemort’s fear causes him to choose evil. After Voldemort has returned and killed Cedric Diggory in *The Goblet of Fire*, Dumbledore advises the Hogwarts students to remember Cedric “if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right, and what is easy” (628). Sartre asserts that there is always a choice, and it is Voldemort’s quality of continuously choosing what is easy before what is right, regardless of its consequences for other people, that makes him so evil (*Existentialism is a Humanism* 44). Voldemort is, for example, “determined to possess [the Elder Wand], because he believes it will make him truly invulnerable” (*Deathly Hallows* 401). He does not care how many lives are lost in the process, and even kills Snape, whom he believes has “been a good and faithful servant”, without the slightest remorse, in a vain attempt to master the wand (527).

While Harry’s respect for other people helps him embrace death, Voldemort’s contempt for Others is also the reason for his fear of dying. When Voldemort learns
about the magical world, one of his first remarks is: “My mother can’t have been magic, or she wouldn’t have died” (*Half-Blood Prince* 257). Voldemort couples immortality with his own powers and supposed superiority over Others, and for him, dying would imply recognition of the freedom and agency of other people, something he is obviously incapable of. He is unable to accept death because his whole sense of death and otherness is so different from Harry’s. When Harry comes face to face with death he notes how “his will to live ha[s] always been so much stronger than his fear of death” (*Deathly Hallows* 554). For Voldemort, it is the other way around. Because of his obsessive fear of death, Voldemort’s only goal in life is to avoid dying. According to Deavel, Voldemort “represents a choice to forsake living a life of abundance, giving and receiving love, for a life simply taking by force or deceit from another’s life” (136). Unlike Harry, he cannot find meaning in life by sharing it with other people; Voldemort only sees Others as threats to his immortality. Instead, he chooses to “force” himself to exist in a “cursed life” without love, friendship, acceptance or generosity, simply to escape death.

In the end, Voldemort’s refusal to respect Others and accept death is not only what makes him evil but also the reason for his defeat. For Sartre, acceptance of death is the “highest form of generosity” because it involves becoming “a pure object” by handing oneself over to Others (*Notebooks for an Ethics* 48). Voldemort’s choice not to accept death is further evidence of how his attitude towards otherness differs from Harry’s. While Harry chooses generosity by sacrificing himself to save Others, Voldemort refuses to loose control over himself. Instead of regarding Others as free individuals, he kills countless innocent victims just to keep himself alive. It is this difference that determines the outcome of their last battle. Harry’s sacrifice and acceptance prevent Voldemort from killing him and those around him. As Dumbledore tells Harry: “You had accepted, even embraced, the possibility of death, something Lord Voldemort has never been able to do. Your courage won” (*Deathly Hallows* 569). In his sacrifice, Harry gives his comrades-in-arms the same kind of protection that his mother gave him (591). In the end, all of Voldemort’s safety measures fail to protect him, and he dies because of his ignorance of the power of love, the one thing that could have saved him.
5. Conclusion

Although research has been made on other types of otherness as well as on other existential concepts in the *Harry Potter* series, there has, as far as I am aware, been no previous research on the concept of the existential Other in the novels. I believe that many of Sartre’s theories are applicable to the novels, and by analysing Harry’s and Voldemort’s diverging attitudes towards existential otherness it is possible to view the construction of their identities from a new perspective. What is the difference between a noble hero and an evil villain? Although there may be no right or wrong answer to that question, this essay indicates that Harry’s and Voldemort’s attitudes to otherness do affect their choices for good or evil, and consequently, the roles they come to play in the story. Harry’s most genuinely heroic actions, as well as Voldemort’s most evil ones, can all, directly or indirectly, be traced back to their relations to otherness. For Sartre, man is nothing but what he *wills* himself to be, and since Harry and Voldemort come from similar backgrounds, it is principally their attitudes and their subsequent actions and choices that reveal the true difference between them.

While Harry’s generally positive attitude towards Others helps him act altruistically, gain trust and face death, Voldemort’s neglect of Others has the opposite effect. It causes him to make egocentric choices, oppress Others and thereby create his own enemies. While Harry overcomes his fear of death and accepts it like a true hero, Voldemort keeps struggling to escape it. However, it is not his fear of death that makes him evil, but his obsession to avoid it at any cost. By killing others to survive, Voldemort emphasises his villainous identity. Eventually, Harry is also able to turn his negative attitude towards Voldemort into something positive. While Voldemort’s indifference is the cause of his evil egocentric actions, Harry’s hate continuously helps him choose the good over the evil. Moreover, Harry and Voldemort initially see each other as mere threats, but Harry’s attitude changes whereas Voldemort’s remains statically hostile. The scene where Harry asks Voldemort to show some remorse is an excellent illustration of the difference between the two characters and how their identities are constructed and perceived: Harry’s attempt to save not only his friends but also his enemies is what makes him a true hero, while it is Voldemort’s ignorance and instinctive choice to kill that make him so fundamentally evil.
6. References


