

Death and Harry Potter

Death and Philosophy

- Philosophers deal in questions and ideas around death
- Which is the ultimate unknown
- Since death is so unpleasant a prospect, however, some people try to avoid it, deny it and put it out of their minds.
- Young may feel invincible, as though death is something that only happens to others.
- Heidegger (1889-1976) calls authenticity - comes from accepting death and reflecting deeply on our mortality

Philosophers

1. Some philosophers think we should be unconcerned about death, since when we die we cease to exist
2. The arrival of death corresponds with our departure

Heidegger

1. Heidegger in contrast, thought authentic living requires a choice to face what our death implies – that we will no longer be
2. As an atheist, he thought that at death we cease to exist, and living authentically is to live with the recognition that death is ever close at hand.
3. And this should shape how we live and think right now
4. Harry Potter was confronted with death right from the start, due to being an orphan – which made him aware of his mortality.
5. Harry lives an authentic life compared with Voldemort who lives an inauthentic life in relation to Heidegger's definition of authenticity.

Life after death and the search for meaning

1. The issue of death and whether there is an afterlife is one theme that is in Harry Potter
2. Thinkers ranging from Martin Heidegger who rejected life after death, to other philosophers who affirmed it such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant
3. What one believes about life after death profoundly affects how one understands the meaning of this life

Harry Potter

1. Voldemort wishes above all things to avoid death and has performed the most treacherous actions to ensure it.
2. There are deaths of significant characters in many of the books.
3. And it culminates in the near death of Harry.

Grave of Harry's Parents

1. In the scene in the Deathly Hallows when Harry and Hermione finally reach the grave of Harry's parents in Godric's Hollow and Harry reads the verse inscribed on the gravestone of his parents
2. 'the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death'
3. Harry at first worries that this is a Death Eater idea
4. And he wonders why such an inscription is there
5. Hermione reassures him it is about living after death.
6. But Harry's parents were not with him and it may have caused him to see death as the fate of everyone.

The Approaching Battle

1. Harry at the end marches towards the Forbidden Forest for the last time
2. He has just learned that the only way Voldemort can be finished off is for Harry himself to die
3. Taking a piece of Voldemort's soul down with him
4. Dumbledore had known that Harry would follow through even if it meant his death

Harry marching to his own death

1. Heidegger doesn't suggest that we should morbidly reflect about death
2. But rather than we come to terms with death and the limitations it implies
3. In order for us to take advantage of opportunities we have and to move into the future
4. Harry's actions are examples of authentic Heideggerian living: recognising limitations, seizing opportunities and accepting one's own mortality (Walls and Walls 2010).

King's Cross Station

1. The King's Cross Station is a realm, where time and space function differently
2. Waiting for Harry in this mysterious place is none other than Albus Dumbledore

3. Heidegger – suggests that we should look into our past to uncover new possibilities for understanding life
4. We need to choose our hero from the past – a guide – that can help us and that we can have a dialogue with
5. Dumbledore – provides this for Harry at King’s Cross station which resembles a kind of purgatory. (A place of penitence in Catholic doctrine).
6. Dumbledore also acknowledges his wrong doings

Voldemort at King’s Cross

1. There is also the Voldemort creature at King’s Cross station.
2. It seems that decisions made by Voldemort have rendered his soul beyond repair
3. The quest for immortality is present in other films and programmes as well e.g. *Lord of the Rings*, *Doctor Who* at some level.

Reap a Destiny

1. William James (1842-1910) ‘sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny’
2. Our thoughts lead to actions which upon becoming habit yield a character and ultimately destiny
3. Voldemort’s destiny is the result of a lifetime of choices that put him on a fatal trajectory to destruction.

Heidegger and destiny

1. Heidegger as an atheist thought that awareness of death should inform how we live and our choices.
2. Voldemort’s choices have put him beyond help. He has chosen his fate.
3. His thoughts led to actions, and then habits, then character and destiny.

Death and the process of becoming.

1. We have to live with our chosen selves.
2. Dumbledore was not perfect but showed remorse for his mistakes
3. Voldemort refuses to show remorse and so has to continue on his self-imposed path.

Aristotle and behaviour

1. If Aristotle is right, repeated wrong behaviour makes us yet more likely to continue in it and makes it harder to resist
2. Our choices forge our characters
3. Some people might actually prefer the darkness to light – because they've cultivated appetites that only vice can satisfy e.g. Voldemort.
4. Both Rowling and Heidegger highlight the Jamesian point that our choices here shape our destiny

Locke

1. The philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) suggested that the things that give us our most real identity are our memories and character.
2. His view is that our personal identity is intertwined with our characters.
3. Heidegger sees that if death is the end of us forever, that has implications for meaning and morality
4. But even bigger implications if death is not the end and rather is the beginning

Ambiguity in Harry Potter

1. It was ambiguous in much of Harry Potter whether death is the end or the beginning – until the end.
2. Where death is portrayed as the next great adventure by Dumbledore.
3. The characters are confronted with moral choices – between what is good and what is easy e.g. the deathly hallows.
4. The choices that Harry makes, for example, have profound consequences
5. Implying that the choices we make also have consequences.

Death and Humour

1. There is a link between humour being used in relation to trauma and when linked to death, issues surrounding death it tends to be associated as gallows humour.
2. Such as the life of Brian – when Brian is on the cross at the end of the film, he signs always look on the bright side of life.

References

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