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Mirrors to the Underworld: Reflective Portals between Life and Death in the Harry Potter Series

Abstract

This article argues that reflective surfaces throughout all seven Harry Potter novels symbolize thresholds between discrete worlds. By displaying Harry's dead parents on 'the other side' of the Mirror of Erised, the text draws on the Myth of Narcissus and various other mythological death-mirrors to create the impression of an inverse afterlife realm where the dead live again, supporting the central themes of death and grief in the series. By drawing upon Lori M. Campbell's theory of object 'porters,' the article shows how the gradual transformation of this framework through more abstract reflections (eyes, creatures, lakes) reveals a deep symbolic framework woven throughout the entire series, with further roots in Farah Mendlesohn's sub-genre classifications as well as modern fantasy literature. When paired with John Granger's contention that Harry's confrontations with death parallel the descents of monomythic heroes across time, the text's spatial symbology allows it to effectively signal the boy wizard's escalating awareness of mortality and willingness to face it, courting death in the name of life.

Additional Keywords

Mythlore; Mirrors to the Underworld: Reflective Portals between Life and Death in the Harry Potter Series; Trenton J. McNulty; mirror; reflection; reflective surfaces; underworld; portal; life and death; porters; monomyth; death; grief; mortality



ERRORS TO THE UNDERWORLD:
REFLECTIVE PORTALS BETWEEN
LIFE AND DEATH
IN THE HARRY POTTER SERIES

TRENTON J. MCNULTY

THE ANCIENT GREEK MYTH OF NARCISSUS is, on the surface, a cautionary one: Entranced by his own reflection in a still pool of water, Narcissus wastes away, consumed by a want for that which he can never have. This mythological story, reoccurring throughout literature and time, has become a kind of archetypal image for fruitless, self-involved desire. It is thus of little surprise that the fantastical Harry Potter series, widely recognized for its use of classical allusions (Mills, Spencer, Granger, etc.) features a similar reflective pool: the Mirror of Erised, an ornate magic mirror which reflects its viewer alongside an image of their greatest unrealized dream. While Narcissus stares into a pure reflection and Harry sees himself reflected alongside his long-dead parents, the parallels are clear: as Richard Spencer notes in a line-by-line comparison of these two reflection scenes, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* describes the Narcissus pool as being "so perfect that its surface had never known a ripple," producing an image so clear that Narcissus tries to kiss the person on the other side (Spencer 57). This same logic informs Harry's decision to force his face against the glass, "hoping to fall right through it" and be reunited with his parents again (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* [Stone] 12.209). In both stories, the illusion of the mirror-reflections leads the boys to see them as windows or portals into an inverse world withholding the object of their respective desires.

This intertextual reading of Erised seems to suggest that the Harry Potter reader is to see in Harry's fixation the same threat to which Narcissus ultimately succumbs. As Harry's headmaster and mentor, Dumbledore, warns: "men have wasted away before [the mirror]. [...] It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live" (Stone 12.213-214). This interpretation, rooted in ideas of escapism and childish want, is what modern critical discourse has largely latched onto. One of the earliest books of Harry Potter scholarship, for example, examines Erised wholly in terms of its hedonistic threat, comparing it to Robert Nozick's famous experience machine (Klein 92), while another author building upon Klein's work characterises the mirror as a pleasure-based method of self-deception (LeFebvre). Literary analysis as recent as 2020 grounds the mirror in ideas of temptation, evoking "the lust of enduring life, money, [and] power"

(Zhou 119). While such interpretations are entirely valid, they are also somewhat reductive, ignoring the substance of the mythological imagery itself in favor of the lesson it conveys. While critics acknowledge the relationship between longing and death, they have yet to consider the medium by which this relationship is depicted: mirrors—or, more generally, reflections—as in both stories the boys are confronted with their own mortality and the concrete reality of death via an image across a reflective plane. Harry sees himself reflected alongside the long-dead, silent family which he will never know in life; and Narcissus watches the life drain from his face as he withers away into a flower—or, in some versions of the story, until he falls through the water and into the River Styx, the threshold to the Greek Underworld. This is, coincidentally, yet another reflective surface, as he can “see himself” within its waters while staring over the edge of Charon’s boat (Spencer 57).

Such reflective surfaces act as resonant symbols within the context of death, as they create the illusion of another world very much like our own—an inverted, uncanny world separated from us by the invisible barrier of the mirror-face itself. In the words of George MacDonald, a widely influential pioneer of fantastic literature, this creates a divide within reality itself, the appearance of “two related worlds [...] the ‘real’ and the ‘reflected’” (Soto 28). It is thus of little surprise that across numerous cultures, mythologies, and even non-Western mystical traditions, “portalling-mirrors” have been independently used to “bridge multiple realities,” particularly those of the living and the dead (MacDonald, George F. 40). Mesoamerican scholar Nicholas Saunders details, for example, how ancient Aztec religious officials used obsidian for its mirror-like qualities to commune with their version of the Underworld, and with their god Tezcatlipoca, Lord of the Smoking Mirror (224). In the Greek and Roman epics which engage with the same mythological lineage as Narcissus, a common motif is the “journey to the underworld” via “the crossing of a body of water” (Birkalan and Garry 489); Orpheus, Odysseus and Aeneas, for example, all seek communion with the dead by crossing the River Styx, once again a reflective surface in Spencer’s view (57). In his article “Reflections on Reflections,” Wolfgang M. Zucker also notes elements of the Narcissus story in the mystic Jewish figure of Adam Kadmon, a prehuman immortal giant who must die after seeing himself in a mirror—a story which may be connected to the Jewish and later widespread European belief that all mirrors in a house should be covered after someone has died, either to prevent their ghost from becoming trapped in a mirror, or to protect one’s own soul from death (247). Such superstitions persist even into the modern era through the common Renaissance art motif of a woman “looking in the mirror and seeing a skull instead of her own young face” (Zucker 248), as well as the folklore tradition of Bloody Mary, a nighttime ritual in which children stand before a washroom mirror and attempt to

summon the apparition of a dead girl (Tucker 186). While disparate, the frequency of these examples across time and across cultures suggest that mirrors have a fundamental connection with death and portals, as they all draw upon the otherworldly illusion of the reflection to create visible, sometimes navigable gateways between the living and the world of the dead.

The ultimate purpose of this article is to prove that the Mirror of Erised participates in the same tradition as all the mythological death-mirrors which came before it, as a projection of the literal and metaphorical divide between life and death. Unlike other interpretations of Erised, I argue that Harry's dead parents are not depicted through a mirror solely to draw upon the gravitas of classical myths, or to imply the self-involved threat of Harry's obsession, but rather as the beginning of a transformative trend which weaves its way across the entire series via an escalating chain of reflections. By analysing these surfaces—such as eyes, lenses, lakes, and beasts—I show how the text continually transforms the Erised framework, incorporating mythopoetic trends and fantasy portal conventions in a pattern which eventually coalesces into a cohesive metaphor for the hopeless nature of grief. When viewed through this framework, Harry's interactions with reflective symbols effectively illuminate his increasing consciousness of death. This perception is a core focus across all seven novels as Harry struggles to accept his own mortality beneath the rising weight of dead friends and father-figures, and in this way, mirrors feed directly into the thematic thrust of the narrative. My object-focused analysis culminates by integrating both angles—mythology and portal fantasy—in an examination of the many life or death arenas which mark the climaxes of each novel, and which are almost always marked by reflective barriers, suggesting that Harry enters them in a conscious descent into the world of the dead.

ERISED AS A FANTASTICAL DEATH PORTAL

To build a foundational understanding of reflections as veils into death, it is crucial to first examine how the Mirror of Erised is depicted within the text. Unlike its appearances in film and other media, the mirror of the novel is generational in nature. When Harry looks into the glass, he sees not only his dead mother and father, but “at least ten others [...] other pairs of green eyes like his, other noses like his, even a little old man who looked as though he had Harry's knobby knees” (*Stone* 12.208-9). While Harry grew up without knowing or even seeing his true parents (Lily and James Potter), he still had a notion of biological family through his abusive aunt and uncle; that Harry sees not only his parents within the mirror, but generations of long-dead ancestors on both sides of his family frames Erised as the window into an afterlife, as it conforms to our modern understanding of heaven as a realm where families are reunited in death. While the mirror also admittedly represents aspects of desire (Ron sees

himself in the mirror as Quidditch captain and Head Boy), the implication that Harry's mentor, Dumbledore, likewise sees the mirror as a generational gateway to his dead sister and family—an idea confirmed in the narration of the final novel (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* [Hallows] 35.719)—makes the death connection even stronger.

As noted in my initial discussion of the symbolic resonance of mirrors, Harry's personal belief is also likely complemented by the "impression of dimensionality" evoked by the mirror (Burkhard 173). David Langford notes, for example, the manner in which Erised creates the impression of another room beyond it, an "otherworld behind the glass, with the mirror [serving as] a potential portal," as a possible explanation for Harry's unambiguous belief in the reality it presents (651). In my view, this is also complemented by the element of reversal; the fact that his parents do not look visibly dead despite the contradiction of their corporeal forms is of no consequence, as the world of any mirror is an inverted, opposite world—and life is the opposite of death. If Harry were to see his family instead through a moving photograph (a common enchantment in the Wizarding world), it is likely his reaction would not be so visceral due to its flat, unreversed, non-reflective surface. With Erised, however, Harry believes his mother to be "standing right behind his reflection" despite the obvious evidence that she is "only air" (*Stone* 12.208). It is her very nature as a mirror-figure which leads him to believe he could "fall right through [the mirror] and reach them," effectively crossing over to 'the other side' in a play on the common death idiom (209). The fact that Harry cannot ultimately make that passage demonstrates the thematic and metaphorical resonance of mirrors, as the impossible pain of real-world grief lies in the fact that 'the other side' is not accessible in life; while remembrance of our relatives may allow them to stay reflected beside us, they remain trapped on the other side of an invisible boundary—the face of Erised—which cannot be transgressed while the soul still has form. In this way, the Mirror of Erised acts as a kind of metatextual mirror: Harry's experience brings him into a sudden awareness of his own grief, just as the reader, using Harry as an audience surrogate, comes to recognize their own potential for loss as an enactment of the death theme.

While it may seem at first inappropriate to make foundational claims about the Mirror of Erised's symbolism from only its brief appearance, there is a strong critical consensus that Harry Potter's mythological landscape, independent of Erised, is one defined by divisions between life and death. For example, critics Victoria Hippard, Andrea Stojikov, and Alice Mills have all noted that within the Harry Potter series, characters have real and malleable souls, and in death may be reunited with their lost loved ones on the other side of a "veil" separating "our mortal world and the world of the dead" (Mills 247). This veil to the afterlife, referred to numerous times in narration and glimpsed

directly via the King's Cross limbo and the literal veil that kills Harry's godfather (Stojikov 143) creates a binary division between dead and living souls. While the presence of ghosts and other half-dead creatures throughout the series complicate a strict binary conception of life and death as states of being, the liminal nature of such exceptions depend on a clear distinction between their two worlds: there is the realm in which Rowling's characters live, and beyond it an afterlife functionally similar to the Christian heaven or Greco-Roman underworld. This provides a strong justification for classifying the Mirror of Erised as a death-portal, as there are other instances and objects throughout the series which clearly serve a similar role, and retroactively signal how Erised may be perceived.

The 'signaling' of the Harry Potter books does not occur solely within the context of the text, however, but also appears to play upon the reader's understanding of existing genre conventions—specifically depictions of other places beyond the surface of a mirror. This motif has clear antecedents throughout the history of modern fantasy, which is itself often inspired by the fantastical, mythological stories which preceded them. Famous examples include mythopoetic author J.R.R. Tolkien's use of the Mirror of Galadriel, a 'scrying' basin of water able to manifest visions of things that were, that are, and that yet may be (Burkhard 172). This harkens back to the perceived divinatory properties of Aztec obsidian mirrors, or more likely the three wells beneath the Norse world-tree, said to bestow wisdom and project visions of fate (Larrington xiv). A more famous mirror-portal is depicted in Lewis Carroll's sequel *Through the Looking Glass*, in which Alice does not travel down a rabbit hole, but through her drawing-room mirror, entering a mirror-realm where the laws of reality are inverted (Campbell 8). As Farah Mendlesohn suggests, such earlier fantasy works serve as clear exemplars of patterns which can be identified in their successors (Mendlesohn 21); as Harry Potter is undoubtedly within the fantasy lineage, the similarities between past mirrors and Erised may denote a trend in which Potter's mirror should likewise be considered a portal to another world. It is also significant that Mendlesohn writes specifically in the context of George MacDonald, as he provides an initial reference point for the use of mirrors in literary fantasy. In *Phantasies*, MacDonald writes, "all mirrors are magic mirrors [...] the commonest room is a room in a poem when I turn to the glass," a statement rooted in his previously mentioned opinions on the division and dimensionality of the reflection (qtd. in Soto 28). In the novel, this manifests itself through Cosmo von Wehrstahl, a character overcome with longing for a woman trapped within a magic mirror, and who ultimately sacrifices himself to free her soul from the reflection (MacDonald, ch. XIII). In another novel, *Lilith*, the protagonist Mr. Vane encounters the ghost-like Raven when they meet "nose-to-beak" across a mirror-portal leading to the magical region of the seven

dimensions (qtd. in Soto 46n20). In these two examples, we see several motifs present in the Erised scene: the obsession over an enchanted mirror; the presence of other-worldly figures within the reflection; and the will of the character in the 'real' world to transcend such a barrier. The standing of MacDonald and his well-established influence among fantasy authors such as Tolkien and C.S. Lewis suggests that such ideas are not merely precedented, but part of a deeper fantasy tradition—what Mendlesohn calls the subgenre of 'portal' fantasy, simply described as any story with "a fantastic world entered through a portal" (Mendlesohn xix). As Mendlesohn suggests, Harry Potter's use of portals places it partly within the portal fantasy tradition (Mendlesohn 2); by creating the impression of another world beyond a mirror, just as MacDonald, Carroll, and Tolkien did before her, Rowling suggests that Erised performs a similar function.

If we accept that the Mirror of Erised is a portal, it naturally follows that passage through it should be possible; this is doubly true given that all the other portals throughout Harry Potter are characterized by back-and-forth movement. Like the invocation of past mirror imagery, this effect is likewise achieved through a manipulation of genre conventions. As Mendlesohn describes, Harry Potter is not a perfect portal fantasy, but rather a hybrid: the novels typically begin as "intrusion fantasies," with magic disturbing the mundane suburban life of Privet Drive, after which they "rapidly transmute into almost archetypal portal fantasies" (Mendlesohn 2) as Harry travels back into the wizarding world via port-keys, floo powder, apparition, or the magical Platform 9³/₄—what Tilia Jacobs describes as "a threshold between worlds" (254). This creates a dense "layering of realms" in which the portals do not merely provide access to the fantasy world of Hogwarts, but enable a "slippage" of magic across both Wizard and Muggle planes (Jacobs 255). This flies in stark contrast to the portals of other fantasy novels, the most famous examples being the wardrobe in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, and the tornado in L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*. In both stories, the young protagonists leave their mundane world by crossing a definitive magical boundary, and upon their return find all evidence of the magic erased: the Pevensie children lose their age, and Dorothy loses her magic slippers. In these archetypal portal fantasies, "the fantastic is on *the other side* and does not 'leak.' [...] [I]ndividuals may cross both ways, but the magic does not" (Mendlesohn xix). While the sequels of each series gradually relax these rules, Harry Potter is an exception from the very beginning: before Harry even enters Hogwarts, he sees witches, wizards, enchanted letters, owls and flying motorcycles all cross the loose thresholds separating the overlaid primary and secondary worlds of magical Britain. In the context of reflections, the sum total of this is to suggest that there is nothing meaningful to distinguish the Mirror of Erised from any

other possible portal in the series: Harry attempts to “fall right through” its invisible surface (*Stone* 12.209) just as he was taught to run through the visible yet very intangible portal to Platform 9¾. When he reaches out behind him, expecting to touch his mother (*Stone* 12.208), it is because the genre-defying slippage of the text’s portals say that it should be possible. As a wizard, Harry also likely remembers the times he was able to enact his own magic in the mundane world: for example, making the glass at the London Zoo disappear before his eyes (*Stone* 2.28). It is thus perfectly reasonable, from Harry’s perspective, that a slippage should occur again: he should be able to enter into the afterlife, “the ultimate in portals” (Mendlesohn 4), collapsing the glass and with it the reality of his mother’s death. The fact that he cannot—that both Harry and the reader’s expectations are summarily deflated—plays into the overriding nature of reflections as a metaphor for the hopelessness of grief; while we often imagine the dead to be with us always, just out of reach, the barrier separating us from them is not one which can be easily transcended.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ERISED FRAMEWORK

While the Mirror of Erised occurs only briefly in the first novel, the use of reflections transforms as the theme of death progresses, becoming more varied and nuanced. This escalation is most striking in the follow-up, as the central mystery of *The Chamber of Secrets* is intimately tied to both sight and mirrors as mediums of death. For example, the central physical threat of the novel is a basilisk: a literal embodiment of death, for it can kill with a glance. “All who are fixed with the beam of its eye,” Rowling writes, “shall suffer instant death” (*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* [*Chamber*] 16.290). While the basilisk’s death-eyes are not explicit mirrors, they are—like all eyes—reflective organs; they receive images as a matter of sight, and render reflections across their glossy surfaces. To look into the eye of a basilisk is to therefore see oneself reflected in death, just as Harry saw himself reflected in the world of the dead. The text cements this association by enacting a doubling; towards the end of the novel, it is revealed that several of the basilisk’s victims survive the creature’s death-reflection only by viewing it through a secondary reflective barrier: a camera lens, a handheld mirror, or a still puddle of water (16.291). Only by placing two separate thresholds between themselves and the dead—a reflection in a reflection—are the characters able to remain in the world of the living, albeit petrified into a near-death state. This is demonstrated through the appearance of the eyes, the seat of sight, as each victim of the basilisk’s gaze is left ‘dead-eyed.’ Mrs. Norris’s eyes are “wide and staring” (8.139), Colin’s “eyes [are] wide” (10.180), Justin’s “eyes star[e] blankly” (11.202), and Hermione’s eyes are “open and glassy” (14.257). If one were to look into these lifeless eyes, they would not see a death-reflection (as with the basilisk), but rather death *behind*

the reflection. This is made quite literal in the case of the basilisk's home, as the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is marked not by a doorway, but by a *washroom*. Upon first entering it, Harry notices a damp floor "reflect[ing] the dull light," and a "large, cracked, and spotted mirror" (9.155). When the basilisk passes through this place of water and mirrors, it effectively passes through a reflective portal, leaving the living world of Hogwarts for the underworld beneath the school.

BIOLOGICAL MIRRORS AND LEGACY: LILY'S GREEN EYES

The deepening of death consciousness through reflections is not limited to the obvious, man-made images supplied by physical mirrors, however, but moves increasingly towards natural reflections as the series goes on. The clearest example of this is the use of eyes to inflict death. While this is shown quite literally through the basilisk, the more impactful and thematically resonant use of eyes lies with Harry himself. As he comes to meet the surviving members of his parent's generation, Harry performs a similar Erised-like function for them as a living reminder of his mother, father, and all the other souls lost during the First Wizarding War. Crucially, this is tied to one of the most identifiable symbols of family within the novels: eyes, specifically Lily's eyes. When first looking into the Mirror of Erised, Harry is only able to recognize his dead mother by their one shared feature: "[H]er eyes are just like mine, Harry thought [...] bright green—exactly the same shape [...]" (*Stone* 12.208). When others see him for the first time, this same process of recognition occurs, creating an interdependent relationship between two core themes—death and legacy. This occurs in nearly every novel. For instance, upon first meeting Harry, the wand-maker Ollivander remarks: "You have your mother's eyes" (*Stone* 5.82). Identical comments are made by Hagrid (*Stone* 4.47), Dumbledore (*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* [*Azkaban*] 22.427), Elphais Doge (*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* [*Phoenix*] 3.47) and Slughorn (*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* [*Prince*] 22.491), all with the exact same phrasing, and all in the context of grief over her death. While authors are often keen to note a character's eyes when describing them, these mentions are so ubiquitous that Harry even bemoans "[he] heard it so often he found it a bit wearing" (*Prince* 4.69). This suggests that the physical connection between Harry and his mother is not mere description, but of enough symbolic consequence that repetition is necessary. When one looks at Harry, they see Lily as well, staring back at them across a reflective plane—the same image Harry once saw in the Mirror of Erised. This turns Harry into a portable, miniature instance of the mirror, forcing others to acknowledge death and mortality in the context of generational loss. Dumbledore even weaponizes Harry's eyes for this exact purpose immediately after Lily's death, noting that Harry has "her eyes, precisely her eyes" in an

attempt to provoke Snape, who bellows, “DON’T! . . . Gone . . . dead . . .” (*Hallows* 33.678). In this way, Harry’s green eyes become, like the basilisk, almost predatory in their infliction of grief: to see them is to see death.

While Harry’s eyes allow others to recognize loss and mortality, the process does not at first seem to satisfy the idea of transportation so crucial to the Erised framework; the reflective threshold is not a conventional portal, and there appears to be no possibility of movement. However, the abrupt nature of Harry’s forced recognition might be considered a form of portalling, with Harry triggering movement as a port-key. While this is a more abstract interpretation of a portal, it is supported by existing Harry Potter scholarship. In her book, *Portals of Power*, Lori M. Campbell argues against Farah Mendlesohn’s supposedly limited conception of portals-as-doorways, suggesting instead that all “living beings, places, and magical objects” might also serve as what she calls “porters” between worlds—be those worlds literal or symbolic (6). While Mendlesohn does not necessarily exclude magical objects from her original definition of portals, Campbell’s interpretation of such objects allows for more abstract, inward movement onto “higher planes of consciousness” (Campbell 6). This framework provides a vocabulary to define the phenomenon of Harry’s bright green eyes: they act as ‘porters’—mobile, symbolic gateways—transporting Harry’s teachers and role models into a liminal space between past and present, a consciousness of Lily and her death. Campbell even acknowledges Harry himself as the “ultimate in-between” (18) for his porter-like nature of bridging both good and evil, Wizard and Muggle, or—in my interpretation—the worlds of the living and the dead. Crucial to this point is that Harry’s eyes are not liminal purely in the sense that they remind others of Lily’s death, but because they make Harry himself into a “reincarnation of his beloved mother” in the present (Spencer 22). In this sense, Harry is at once both dead and alive, a symbol of the past generation continuing in the present one. While the dead are forever lost to ‘the other side’ of the mirror, the reflective, porter-like nature of the living turn them into embodiments of that divide.

DEATH CONSCIOUSNESS EMBODIED: THESTRALS

Towards the middle point in the series, as Harry comes to experience sudden death as a practical reality rather than a more generalized loss, the Erised framework is projected onto a neutral, horse-like magical creature: a thestral. While they do not maliciously inflict death-consciousness in the same manner as the basilisk, a thestral is nevertheless able to create a porter-ing effect tied to sight, as “the only people who can see thestrals [...] are people who have seen death” (*Phoenix* 21.446). This is seen in the appearance of the creatures themselves—not because of their skeletal, grim-reaper-like nature (which has obvious death connections), but because of their eyes. The text repeatedly

describes them as “pupil-less,” “white,” “staring” (10.197), “blank” and “gleaming” (11.201). This bears a striking similarity to the basilisk’s dead-eyed victims in the second novel, where narration likewise draws attention to their “blankly” “wide and staring” (*Chamber* 11.202, 8.139) eyes at every opportunity. This, combined with the running symbolism of Lily’s green eyes, again suggests a connection between eyes and death-consciousness, becoming more varied and nuanced as Harry himself evolves. While Harry is well-acquainted with death through his parents, he is only able to see the thestrals in the fifth novel, presumably due to the sudden death of classmate Cedric Diggory at the end of *The Goblet of Fire*, which Harry witnesses with his own eyes. Due to this increased awareness of death, Rowling writes that “[Harry] could see the bat-winged horses reflected in [Luna’s] wide silvery eyes” (*Phoenix* 10.199). In this, the text presents three layers of death-reflections interlaced with one another: because he has seen death, he sees the dead-eyed thestrals reflected upon the surface of another’s eyes: an eye to an eye through an eye. This is the same connection through which Harry recognized the reality of his mother’s death in the Mirror of Erised—a link Harry immediately makes himself, recognizing that he “once before had the experience of seeing something that Ron could not [...] a reflection in a mirror” (*Phoenix* 11.201). This is a clear reference to Ron’s encounter with the Mirror of Erised, in which he failed to see Harry’s parents or death of any kind, just as he is later unable to see the thestrals. Harry, however, is able to place them within the only context he understands, wondering if “the beasts had always been there but invisible” (11.201), just as he once wondered if Erised showed him “a room full of invisible people” (*Stone* 12.208). Through the symbolic nature of the thestrals and his past consciousness of death, Harry begins to recognize that which is invisible to Ron yet has existed since the beginning of the series—the divisions between life and death rendered through light and sight.

A CONDUIT FOR GRIEF: HARRY’S TWO-WAY MIRROR

By the end of the fifth novel, Harry’s recognition of the death-mirror framework deepens such that he begins to internalize its function within the text, actively using mirrors to navigate his experience of grief. This is best exemplified by the ‘two-way’ mirror: a communication device gifted to Harry by his godfather, Sirius Black, and tellingly forgotten until after Sirius has died. In a chapter titled “Beyond the Veil,” Sirius, struck by a curse, falls backwards through an “archway” (*Phoenix* 35.806) from which Luna and Harry—able to see thestrals and understand death in a way others cannot—hear what they believe to be whispers of the dead (34.774). This is a portal to the afterlife, in Mendlesohn’s unambiguous use of the term: “a subtle, magical division between life and death,” used here to demonstrate how the physical reality of

such a portal suggests that a physical reflection merely acts as another, more tenuous gateway into this realm (Campbell 162). This association is so strong in Harry's mind that his first instinct upon rediscovering Sirius's gift—the two-way mirror—is to speak into it. Rowling writes: “[Harry] remembered seeing his dead parents in the Mirror of Erised four years ago. He was going to be able to talk to Sirius again, right now, he knew it” (*Phoenix* 38.858). Harry, having seen Sirius enter the world of the dead, naturally expects to find him there alongside Lily and James Potter. The particular choice of a mirror becomes especially clear when one considers that the device is not clearly established before this scene; of all the possible magical inventions the text might present for Harry to talk to Sirius, it presents not an enchanted image, nor a two-way diary, but a mirror. With it, Harry is once again able to recall the Mirror of Erised, invoking its previously established symbolism and instilling the same sense of tragedy for Harry in his inability to pass through it while he still lives.

In the final book, Sirius's two-way mirror becomes a means of externalizing the death-mirror framework as Harry understands it, and the direct channel through which Harry processes his grief for Dumbledore—his last, great father-figure, killed at the end of the penultimate novel. The mirror thus becomes a keepsake reminder of the reflective border between living and dead, and the promise that Harry might be able to facilitate movement or communication across it. This begins when Harry sorts through the shattered remains of the two-way mirror and sees a “flash of brightest blue” shining from the other side (*Hallows* 2.29). The narration, reflecting Harry's own perspective, unambiguously identifies this apparition in the glass as “Dumbledore's eye” (*Hallows* 3.30). While he knows that Dumbledore is lost to the world of the dead, and “wouldn't come back as a ghost” (*Hallows* 25.504), Harry remains adamant that he truly saw Dumbledore in the mirror, despite Hermione's objections (483). While the surface text presents this as an irrational belief driven by grief, it makes perfect sense in the context of Harry's own experience. The Narcissus framework of the Mirror of Erised has been transformed to such a degree that his interactions with eyes, thestrals, and magic mirrors throughout the series tells Harry that all reflections are portals, and through them communion with the dead is entirely possible. This is why, when trapped in Malfoy Manor, Harry abandons practicality and instead retrieves the mirror from his bag, yelling “‘Help us!’ [...] in mad desperation” (23.466). While the text later reveals that this blue eye belongs to Aberforth (Dumbledore's brother) looking through the mirror's real-world counterpart, Harry's initial perception of the two-way mirror illuminates his internal conception of reflections, death, and the symbolism between them. While he was unable to use it to commune with Sirius, Harry nevertheless believes in its portal-like quality; he sees a mirror, and an eye reflected across it, and makes the Erised connection. This may be related

to the last mention of Dumbledore in the preceding novel, *The Half Blood Prince*. At his funeral, the text notes that Harry turns his “eyes upon Dumbledore's white tomb” only to see it “reflected in the water” on “the other side of the lake” (*Prince* 30.651). Within the Erised framework, this suggests that Dumbledore has passed through to “the other side” of life and death, represented symbolically by the reflected image of his tomb. Harry’s recognition of this movement may justify his obsession with the two-way mirror: just as he turned to it after Sirius passed through the veil, so too does he turn to it to communicate with Dumbledore. The impact of this association reveals itself throughout the final book, as Harry gradually becomes unable to distinguish between reflections and mere images of the dead. For example, after seeing Dumbledore “staring at him from a small rectangular mirror,” Harry breaks into a run, believing he’ll be able to talk to his mentor, only to find that “it was not a mirror at all,” but a book cover (*Hallows* 13.252). When he later sees “his own face [...] looking back at him” from the ceiling of Luna’s room, it takes him a moment to realise that “it was not a mirror, but a painting” (21.417). Having totally internalized the portal-like function of mirrors within the text, reflections become the conceptual medium through which he views the world. There is a slippage of reflections and images at once living and dead, animate and static, recalling Jacobs’s conception of the Harry Potter world as a place defined by portal-like movement across wizard and muggle planes. Jacobs goes further, however, in suggesting that this layering creates a “sacred and mythical symbolic geography” (255) in which even mundane, utilitarian objects like port-keys “bear a striking resemblance to sacred objects in archaic societies” (e.g. Aztec obsidian mirrors) as they provide access to other worlds (251). As a portal-like device, the Mirror of Erised and its reflective framework replicates this dynamic rather perfectly, especially given Harry’s obsession with the two-way mirror. For him, it serves as a sacred object which creates a point of access to the realm of the dead. This precipitates my return to mythology, as I have so far established that the series draws upon and continually transforms mythic associations between mirrors and the realm of the dead to explicate Harry’s consciousness of mortality. However, if Harry’s confrontations with Erised and other reflections are meant to harken back to mythological stories, it is equally possible that Harry is meant to resemble their protagonists—that Harry’s continual willingness to access such death spaces using mirrors does not merely reinforce the intended symbolism of mirrors within the series, but also casts him in the same role as all those mythological figures which confront death.

HARRY AS A CLASSICAL HERO FIGURE

Harry's status as an epic hero is validated by the wealth of classical criticism which draws clear parallels between Harry and Narcissus, but also the previously mentioned epic heroes of Orpheus, Odysseus, and Aeneas; Odysseus is of particular focus for Richard Spencer, who notes in his book-long examination of the subject, *Harry Potter and the Classical World*, that Harry's exposure to the Mirror of Erised and the veil in the Department of Mysteries both parallel Odysseus's exposure to a siren's song, luring him into death (Spencer 32). J.K. Rowling herself calls the series an "epic saga" in the classical mold, explaining Dumbledore's death as a fulfillment of mythic tradition ("An Evening with Harry, Carrie and Garp"), and this assessment is further validated by the fact that each book maps perfectly onto the hero's journey or 'monomyth' formula of comparative mythology as conceived by Joseph Campbell. Within such a formula, the hero is meant to confront death at the climax of the story, and there is support for this idea in Spencer's broad analysis of the series, as he cites G. S. Kirk's list of common classical themes, among them "the testing of life and death through visits to the Underworld," as obvious descriptors of the Harry Potter novels (21). In his book, *How Harry Cast His Spell*, John Granger also provides evidence for this classical origin; while his core argument is rooted in Christian theology, his categorizations of Harry's journeys are grounded in Campbell's conceptions of descent and return, derived from classical mythology. As noted earlier, Harry "descends into the earth [...] triumphs against impossible odds [...] dies a figurative death [...] and returns to the land of the living" towards the climax of each novel (Granger 64). In this framework, the physical spaces in which Harry confronts danger (e.g. the Chamber of Secrets or the Department of Mysteries) all take on symbolic roles as representations of the Underworld.

While many point to the obvious 'Fluffy/Cerberus' symbolism of the first novel¹ as one of only a few clear markers signifying descent, in truth almost all of the arenas cited by Granger are marked by a symbolic threshold—specifically, a threshold of *reflections*. Rowling uses the mirror framework in tandem with her death-focused monomythic approach to signify, as Erised does, a border between the worlds of the living and the dead. When Harry passes through to the other side of the mirror, he faces the death that Cerberus represents.

¹ The entrance to the third-floor corridor in *The Sorcerer's Stone*—the final arena in which Harry confronts Voldemort—is marked by a three-headed dog named Fluffy: "a half-comic version of the three-headed dog, Cerberus, who guards the entrance to the classical underworld" (Mills 243). Thus, when Harry defeats Cerberus and passes the threshold, Rowling signals to the reader that he has symbolically entered the world of the dead.

HARRY'S UNDERWORLD DESCENTS

While the most explicit and nuanced descents through reflective thresholds occur in the final two novels of the series (to be discussed), there are four intermediary descents following the original novel; these must be discussed first, as they expand the reflective threshold's range of meaning to include water-barriers in the vein of Narcissus's pond which denote hellish, underworld landscapes within their depths.

The first and most obvious example of Rowling's conformity to mythic structures is the Chamber of Secrets, as it can only be entered through a washroom: a threshold of mirrors and waters. Within both Granger's framework and my own, the area beyond the reflective area thus becomes the symbolic world of the dead. This is supported textually in the description of the chamber as being "miles under the school" (*Chamber* 16.302). This places it underneath the damp, reflective floor of the washroom which marks its entrance (9.155), but also "under the lake" itself, in a place characterised by darkness, monstrous shadows, rat skulls, and tunnels "quiet as the grave" (16.302). In Jacobs's words, it is a space "replete with images of the Underworld [...] a space of death and near-death" (259). Naturally, when Harry enters it through a reflection and passes into the depths, this is what he finds—a nearly-lifeless Ginny, the death-staring basilisk, and a fragment of Voldemort's soul.

It should be noted, however, that the notion of Harry entering the world of the dead does stand in contrast to the text's contradictory treatment of death-mirrors as impassable portals. As previously argued, the tragedy and purpose of the Mirror of Erised is to force an acknowledgement that there is no passage back across the glass for those who have died, and that Harry is not able to enter their world while he lives. By violating this principle, the text suggests that Harry is entering into a space where his death is truly possible, able to consign him forever to the other side of the mirror. It may even be possible that, in entering the figurative Underworld, he *dies*. This is not a contradiction, but an essential part of Harry's fulfillment of the epic journey. As Alice Mills notes, "crossing the boundary between life and death can only be done in one direction for all but the most exceptional of heroes" (248). That Harry enters the underworld and undergoes a figurative death before being reborn into the land of the living is precisely what places him among the epic heroes of old.² In this way, the text engages in a kind of transformative mythopoesis, using ancient symbolism to inform the reader's understanding of reflections, and then projecting that symbolism onto the environment itself to communicate both

² The aforementioned use of water denoting death via the River Styx complements this idea of rebirth, as Harry's ascents could be considered baptismal—a water-rebirth in a Greco-Roman context.

Harry's desire to face death, a fundamental aspect of his character, and the certain threat he faces in doing so.

The text addresses the water motif more explicitly in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* by projecting the symbolic dynamic of death and near-death onto the surface of the Great Lake of Hogwarts—a vast symbolic mirror. Harry falls upon its shores at the climax of the novel, trying to save his godfather Sirius Black from soul-sucking dementors—embodiments of death—only to be rescued by Harry's own stag patronus (*Azkaban* 21.410). Narration describes it galloping “across the black surface of the lake,” warding off the dementors, and then returning “across the still surface of the water” (21.411).

The Great Lake's death-connection returns again in the following book, *The Goblet of Fire*, as the text describes the underwater world of the merpeople as a demonic, underworld realm. As before, the lake is constructed like a mirror: it is not rough or choppy, but clearly reflects the stands (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* [Goblet] 26.492) and the Durmstrang ship (12.188). Throughout the series, narration consistently highlights “the smooth, black, glassy surface of the water” (*Chamber* 5.73). While Harry's submersion in the lake during the second task of the Tri-Wizard tournament is not the climax of the novel, it is nevertheless a descent, with Spencer calling it a “close parallel” to Aeneas's journey to the Underworld, as both heroes enter “murky worlds of peril and death” to act as saviors in their victory (54-55). The commonalities, unsubstantiated by Spencer, lie mainly in the lake's similarity to the Chamber of Secrets as a place of death and near-death: like Ginny, the hostages are said to be in a “very deep sleep” (*Goblet* 26.498), “ghostly green and pale” (26.500). The water itself also has clear Underworld connotations, as Harry describes it as “searing” like “fire” (26.493) and filled with grindylows, “horned water demons” with “pointed fangs” determined to drag Harry into the depths, thereby keeping him on the dark side of the mirror forever (26.495). When Harry breaches the glassy surface of the lake, he is effectively performing the same descent he attempted two years previous when he passed through the reflective washroom-threshold of the Chamber of Secrets: in both sequences, Harry ventures “under the lake” (*Chamber* 16.302) to rescue a Weasley, and there battles death in the form of hellish magical creatures—the grindylows and basilisk, respectively. The similarity of these two Great Lake descents, considered together, confirm that the area beneath any reflective water surface in the Harry Potter world is a realm of death, as they are all host to such demonic creatures as basilisks, grindylows, possibly dementors, and—as seen in the descent of the sixth novel (to be discussed)—the zombie-like inferi.

Harry's drive to descend into death to save others from it manifests itself in *The Order of the Phoenix*, as Harry enters the Department of Mysteries—a place of death holding a portal between the “mortal world and the world of

the dead”—in an attempt to once again save his godfather, Sirius Black (Mills 247). The text thus marks the threshold of the Department of Mysteries in the same manner as it marked each space of descent before it. Narration describes “cool, shimmering light reflected in the shining marble floor,” producing an illusion of “dark water underfoot” within which Harry can see his own “ghostly reflections” (*Phoenix* 34.770). The use of the word “ghostly” is especially significant in this instance, as it suggests, again, a state of death or near-death. By merely entering the threshold, some aspect of Harry’s soul has crossed over to the other side of the reflection as a marker of his figurative death within the monomyth framework.

AN ANALYSIS OF REFLECTIVE ARENAS: HARRY’S FINAL DESCENTS

The trend linking water and death reaches its zenith in the final two books of the series, as the final two underworld descents are saturated in both water and reflections. As a result, they no longer serve as mere thresholds to underworld spaces, but become intrinsic to the spaces themselves. The mythology cultivated over the preceding five novels culminates here, radically altering the reader’s understanding of each climactic scene, as the context of death mirrors transforms them into dense monomythic arenas in which Harry’s every action denotes some deeper meaning within the text’s collective symbology.

In its depiction of a vast, soul-concealing lake, Chapter 26 of *The Half-Blood Prince* combines all previous indications of underworld thresholds: reflections, mirrors, water, demonic creatures hiding within the depths of such thresholds, and the idea of transcending them out of grief and a longing for the dead. The text first establishes the cave as a reflective space through traditional methods of hailing the reader to symbolism: narration repeatedly describes the lake as “smooth” and “glassy” (*Prince* 26.561), “mirror-smooth” (26.575), a “dark mirror” (26.565), all in the same manner as previous reflective spaces. The lake also conflicts with reality, as ripples on the water vanish “unnaturally fast,” quickly returning to a mirror-like state of “shining black glass” (26.561); it is fixed, possibly enchanted by Voldemort in the same manner as the perfectly flat pool of Narcissus. This suggests that the water truly is a mirror, with all the associations that word implies. The scene’s mythological connections go deeper than Narcissus, however, as John Granger refers to the space beneath the water as the “Stygian depths” (Granger 52). Spencer similarly compares Harry and Dumbledore’s passage across it to Charon “crossing the river Styx in his small boat in the Underworld” (63). It is thus unsurprising that below the surface, in the symbolic realm of death, lay inferi: “an army of the dead” (*Prince* 26.575). As with the Mirror of Erised, Harry once again sees the dead staring at him, “face up,” across a glassy surface (26.565). The text even replicates the eye-to-eye

connection Harry makes with his mother by noting the “open [...] misted” eyes of the inferi below (26.565-6). When Harry stares into them, it is a repetition of his encounters with the misty-eyed thestrals and basilisk victims of past novels, a conscious recognition of the misty distance separating the living from the dead. This symbolism extends even to the cave’s treasure—a ‘horcrux’ fragment of Voldemort’s soul—as Rowling conceals the horcrux within another basin of flat, glassy water. As with the lake itself, the text constructs Harry’s desire to transcend the basin in the same language as his prior attempt to pass through the Mirror of Erised. When he reaches out to “touch” Lily in the first novel, he feels “only air” (*Stone* 12.208), just as he feels only “solid and inflexible air” when he and Dumbledore both attempt to “touch” the potion in the basin (*Prince* 26.568). This parallel construction suggests that the basin’s “invisible barrier” (26.568) as described by Harry is that same barrier which keeps the living apart from the dead: a barrier which cannot be seen, yet is still felt. Harry and Dumbledore both wish to drink from the basin, “desperately” in Harry’s case (26.570), yet once Dumbledore makes the decision, it is literally reflected in the water: Harry sees him lose his most identifiable quality, looking into “blue eyes that had turned green in the reflected light of the basin” (26.570). As discussed previously, green eyes are quite obviously associated with Lily Potter, the lost dead others see when looking into Harry’s own eyes, porter-ing them into a recognition of death. As Dumbledore’s eyes do not merely reflect the basin, but are totally consumed by it, the text suggests that he is to cross over as she did—that he has been marked for death, foreshadowing his murder in the next chapter. As a result, Dumbledore can transcend the basin’s barrier to take the world of the dead into himself. His condition deteriorates with each drink not because of Voldemort’s enchantment but because, on a symbolic level, the potion *is* death: this is why, once he has sufficiently “drained the glass,” referring at once to both the goblet and the glassy surface of the basin, he screams: “I want to die! I want to die! [...] KILL ME!” (26.573).

This death-wish takes on greater meaning in the final book, as Dumbledore’s hallucinations are later revealed to be a recreation of the duel which took his sister’s life (*Hallows* 28.566)—the very same dead sister which Harry believes Dumbledore would have seen when looking into the Mirror of Erised (35.719). As the mirror and the basin parallel each other in construction and symbolic meaning, his desperate desire to die after draining the glass is therefore an acknowledgment of his intention to be with his sister again in the world of the dead—to move totally through the reflective barrier which separates them. The subsequent violent appearance of the inferi at the very end of the chapter (apparently triggered by Dumbledore’s disruption of the basin) is thus unsurprising: by breaching the reflective barrier between life and death, Dumbledore grants the walking dead a pathway into the world of the living.

Notably, their objective is not to attack Harry and Dumbledore outright, as would be expected, but instead to drag them into the water—the other side of the mirror, the symbolic underworld—with “arms cold as death” (29.576). By employing them in this way, the text solidifies the cave as a symbolic arena poised between life and death, in every sense of the phrase.

The same framework of willing descent into death which characterises the horcrux cave occurs again in *The Deathly Hallows*, when Harry seeks the destruction of yet another piece of Voldemort’s soul by attempting to retrieve a horcrux-killing sword from the depths of a symbolic body of water—in this case, a “small, frozen pool” (*Hallows* 19.367). While this scene does not unfold at the very end of the book, as most of Harry’s descents do, its placement at the beginning of the end puts it in an analogous spot when considering the series as a whole. In many ways, it is a culmination of mirror symbolism in the series, the mythological descent of the Erised framework. The text establishes this final barrier as a divide between life and death in that Harry’s encounter with it follows the same structure and language as past mirror-symbols. He brings his wand up to the “cracked black surface” of the ice to see it “glittering” (*Hallows* 19.367), just as he once raised his wand-light to the “glittering [...] black water” of the horcrux cave, both in a process of recognition (*Prince* 26.565). It even acts as a mirror does, “reflect[ing] [Harry’s] distorted shadow” (*Hallows* 19.367). By approaching these scenes in the same way, the text suggests that the frozen surface of the lake is an invocation of the previous novel: beneath the reflected wand-light, in either case, lies darkness—the world of the dead. To transcend the ice-water barrier is therefore to assume the same role which Dumbledore once played in the horcrux cave: Harry breaks “the surface of the pool” by diving into the water (19.369), just as Dumbledore’s goblet “sank into the surface” of the basin (*Prince* 26.570).

By writing their attempts to collect each object as direct parallels of one another, Rowling may be trying to signal that the motivations behind their actions are likewise similar: Dumbledore longs to see his sister Ariana again, just as Harry wishes to see Lily, James, and Sirius once more. This is why, before Harry breaks the reflective barrier, he unconsciously holds onto the horcrux locket that shall enable his possible death, yet carefully strips himself of “his mother’s letter, the shard of Sirius’s mirror, and the old Snitch [containing the resurrection stone],” as they are all reminders of the veil that distances him from those he has lost (*Hallows* 19.369). If the space beyond the reflection truly is the world of the dead, that distance will soon be bridged, and thus it is no longer necessary for Harry to carry those objects. Once he resigns himself to death, submerging himself in the waters just as Dumbledore took them into himself, it is of little surprise what (or who) Harry finds. Choked by the horcrux locket, “[Harry] was going to drown, there was nothing left [...] the arms that closed

around his chest were surely Death's" (19.370). After crossing through the mirror and into the depths of the Underworld, Harry naturally meets its ruler: Death itself, personified. The similarity of this scene to Harry's near drowning by the inferi in the previous novel is apt: in both arenas of descent, Harry faces the reflective barrier he has for years longed to transcend, and here gives himself over entirely to the cold arms of Death. While in both instances he enacts a symbolic rebirth due to the intervention of another, these ritualistic water descents presage Harry's final, self-sacrificial descent into the Forbidden Forest at the end of the final novel, just as Dumbledore's experience in the horcrux cave foreshadowed his own self-sacrificial end. In this way, both scenes, spread across two novels, act as the final and most explicit expressions of a symbology, theme, and monomythic movement which characterise the entire series.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

All told, the countless mirrors and reflections that populate each Harry Potter novel are not merely idle description, but deliberate metaphorical expressions of the intangible barrier that separates the living from those they have lost. The mythological trend of death mirrors, once applied to the Mirror of Erised and projected onto every cracked glass and shallow puddle, reveals a transformative symbolic geography with further roots across the history of fantasy scholarship and literature. When paired with the symbolic descents and rebirths which characterise the journeys of monomythic heroes across time, this spatial symbology allows the text to effectively signal its protagonist's escalating awareness of mortality and his own willingness to face it, courting death in the name of life.

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