Harry Potter and the Gift of Time

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In the climactic scene of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Harry and Voldemort are both surprised when their wands connect in a rare occurrence later identified as Priori Incantatem. The wands vibrate, a strange cage of light isolates the dueling wizards, and each struggles to drive beads of light toward the other’s wand; in this instance, Harry proves the superior wizard, and Voldemort’s wand takes in the light and then releases its most recent spells, in reverse order. The shadowy figures that emerge are traces, remnants from the past that endure in the present. These include a prosthetic hand, the body of Harry’s just-murdered classmate, and, most important for Harry, his parents, James and Lily Potter, killed on the night when he was marked as Voldemort’s mortal enemy.

In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur describes how traces work: “the trace indicates ‘here’ (in space) and ‘now’ (in the present), the past passage of living beings. It orients the hunt, the quest, the search, the inquiry” (12). Ricoeur could be describing the encounter presented above. The shadows of Harry’s parents are indeed traces that indicate in Harry’s present the “past passage of living beings.” Moreover, in this particular scene, the traces of his parents, along with other shadowy figures, orient the quest; they guide and support Harry as he makes his incredible escape from his enemy.

In this scene, and in many others throughout the seven books in the Harry Potter series, J. K. Rowling uses traces as at once fundamental to the formation of identity and central to the ongoing struggle for power between Harry and Voldemort. Again and again, Harry proves himself able to make use of the past; “his” complex relationship to his past evolves, while Voldemort’s remains static. The “boy who lived” demonstrates an ability to accept traces as connections to the past, yet also as indications that the past has passed. In contrast, Voldemort has no interest in the past—no one from his personal past matters to him, and significant objects and places become for him only vehicles in his quest for immortality. Central to Harry’s heroism is his ability to live in time and even to manipulate and take advantage of its passage, surrounding himself with his personal history and forging his identity from the traces of his family. We see this explicitly in the climactic scene from
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Gold of Fire, but Harry’s deceased family members appear at other key junctures as well: in the Mirror of Erised in Sorcerer’s Stone, in the form of his Patronus, in Snape’s Pensieve in the Order of the Phoenix, and in many non-magical records such as photographs, stories told by surviving friends, and even the Hogwarts detention records. Traces of Harry’s family come most fully to his aid in a scene from the final book, Deathly Hallows, that reprises the Priori Incantatem scene; when Harry uses the Resurrection Stone at the end of the book, he is surrounded again by family, by his past. In a series that clearly charts the development of the protagonist, time proves to be much more than a measure of Harry’s growth. He repeatedly uses time—manifest both as traces and as time travel—to facilitate his development and to take him well beyond the magical and emotional abilities of a typical adolescent.

While Rowling may not intentionally engage with the theory of the trace, she has demonstrated an interest in artifacts that connect people to the past. The prevalence of artifacts/traces in the series may have its origin in a book Rowling has several times identified as a great influence on her development as a writer, Jessica Mitford’s autobiography Hons and Rebels. Rowling said in a 2002 interview with The Scotsman: “My most influential writer, without a doubt, is Jessica Mitford. When my great-aunt gave me Hons and Rebels when I was 14, she instantly became my heroine. I think I’ve read everything she wrote. I even called my daughter after her.” In addition to admiring Mitford’s character, Rowling followed her lead in emphasizing access to the past through its remains. The prologue to Hons and Rebels begins, “Family souvenirs have an almost universal fascination. In most homes there exist, put away in attics or on top shelves, a row of Baby’s first shoes, Brother’s prize-winning essay in the school paper, Sister’s wedding veil . . . Most houses, too, bear scars imprinted by those who have lived in them. . . .” Mitford introduces her autobiography with this attention to physical traces that lead one into relationship with the past, and it is no stretch to imagine that Rowling internalized this sense of time and traces at age fourteen when she first read the book. It is certainly the case that her series is crowded with traces, including Harry’s all-important scar.

The Trace

A scar is a good example of a trace, a mark of something passed that has a continued presence. The trace is most commonly associated with
Jacques Derrida, who in *Of Grammatology* introduces the device as a sign disassociated from its origin. The foundational idea of deconstruction, Derrida’s trace conveys meaning even as its very existence reveals the irretrievability of what is signified; in Harry’s case, the scar shows at once that there was an attack, the attack is over, and the wound has healed. In the preface to her translation of *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains the importance of this term: “the word is ‘trace’ (the French carries strong implications of track, footprint, imprint), a word that cannot be a master-word, that presents itself as the mark of an anterior presence, origin, master” (xv). Spivak continues, “The sign marks a place of difference” (xvi), which is to say that implicit in the trace’s signification is an amplification of the difference between the trace and its origin. Theorizing the trace in a slightly different way, Paul Ricoeur emphasizes its endurance. He explains that the trace indicates “duration, in the sense of the continuation of the same throughout the succession of other phases” (26). While Derrida worries about the fundamental disconnect between the trace and what it recalls, Ricoeur sees instead the possibility of sustained meaning, albeit altered with time. Harry’s scar does not depict the attack and may only slightly resemble the original wound, but it insists that the attack remain present in our consciousness of him.

In the real world, fossils and footprints are examples of traces; in Rowling’s magical world, a complicated and compelling example is Marvolo Gaunt’s ring. Rowling introduces this ring in *Half-Blood Prince*, when Harry and Dumbledore visit a collection of memories that together reveal a great deal about the life and character of Tom Riddle, a.k.a. Lord Voldemort. The ring was prized by Gaunt, Riddle’s grandfather, for whom it symbolized the family’s connection to one of the oldest and purest wizarding families: the Peverell line. For Gaunt, the ring symbolized status more than anything else. It was a trace, a fairly straightforward one, of past glory and family history: “Centuries it’s been in our family, that’s how far back we go, and pure-blood all the way!” (207). Voldemort changes the meaning of the trace when he kills his uncle to obtain it and makes the ring into a Horcrux, a Dark object that contains a fragment of a wizard’s soul. Once Voldemort has claimed and corrupted the ring, it becomes at once a trace of Voldemort’s evil deeds and ambitions and a trace of the Peverell and Gaunt families. Ironically, since Voldemort has no interest in the past, for him the ring signifies his own effort to cheat death and thus to halt time’s passage.
The meaning of the ring shifts again in the last book, when we discover that its stone is the Resurrection Stone, one of the Deathly Hallows. The stone has the power to bring back the dead, though only in a shadow form. With this power, the stone can be seen as a sort of meta-trace, one that generates other traces, shadows of those who once lived. Now, Gaunt’s ring traces an old family, the crimes of a Dark wizard, an old wizarding legend, and the dead whom it is empowered to resurrect. Voldemort is particularly ill-suited to recognize that the stone is the Resurrection Stone of legend. As the Dumbledore who appears in the King’s Cross chapter of the final book—perhaps the man himself, perhaps a product of Harry’s psyche—explains to Harry, “as for the stone, whom would he want to bring back from the dead? He fears the dead. He does not love” (721).3 “Bringing back” is an action associated with traces, and it is not one that Voldemort values. For him, the stone is only a Horcrux, an object meant to defeat time. For Harry, who ultimately uses it to surround himself with his lost loved ones, the stone makes an ally of time. It musters the support of Harry’s past so that he may be strengthened by the presence of those who have died. Indeed, the two characters’ different reactions to the stone offer in miniature the struggles over time that arc across the whole seven-book series. From the Sorcerer’s Stone to Horcruxes, Voldemort prizes objects that offer the promise of his name—flight from death—and an evasion of time’s power. Harry, in unfailing contrast, values objects that recall the past, even when they appear to have no continued value, like the false locket and the broken mirror he carries in his moleskin pouch.4 When these objects prove to have value after all, Harry’s reverence for the past is affirmed. As with the ring, Harry uses these items to maintain a connection to the past that often gives him the strength to brave difficult tasks in the present.

Horcruxes—Traces Distorted

A Horcrux is a distorted trace; though it is necessarily an artifact of some sort, its purpose is not to forge a connection to the past. Instead, it preserves a portion of a wizard’s soul and protects him from the passage of time: it is meant to “guard . . . against mortal death” (Goblet 648). In the effort to defeat time, it differs from a trace, which works with time to endure. As early as his days as a student at Hogwarts, Voldemort sought out Horcruxes as the best strategy to elude death. The Horcrux that Rowling develops most fully is the diary of Tom Riddle that plays
such an important role in *Chamber of Secrets*. After murdering his father, Riddle created the Horcrux, locking in the diary a trace of his teenaged self designed to open the Chamber of Secrets and wreak havoc on life at Hogwarts. That Voldemort creates this first Horcrux by committing patricide leaves no doubt that these objects exist as representations of his violence against his origins. This rejection of the past is further underscored by Voldemort’s lack of interest in the objects once they have become Horcruxes: rather than keeping them nearby to admire or to serve as reminders, he hides them away and, until he realizes they are threatened, he gives them little thought. In *Half-Blood Prince*, Dumbledore explains Voldemort’s detachment from the diary: “he was not aware . . . that the diary had been destroyed until he forced the truth out of Lucius Malfoy [two years later]” (508). This ignorance shows that the present-day Voldemort maintains no connection to the fragment of his past self. Thus, even though he did leave what may be perceived as a trace, it endures only when good wizards, who know the value of the past, activate it. For Voldemort, the diary is first and foremost a Horcrux and secondarily an effective Dark object that is empowered to further an agenda of blood purity. For Harry, though, the diary is a trace. Through his conversations with the young Tom who emerges from the diary, Harry learns about the past, and he builds on this knowledge immediately to exonerate Hagrid and much later to humanize and thus weaken Voldemort in their final confrontation in *Deathly Hallows*. Voldemort’s Horcruxes, inasmuch as they are like traces, follow the Derridean model; they reveal a violent disconnection from origins. In contrast, Harry’s traces exemplify the endurance central to Ricoeur’s description of the trace.

The stark contrast in their relationships with their parents shows clearly how differently Harry and Voldemort make use of their pasts. Harry cherishes his past, and one of the great gifts he gains when he enters the wizarding world is access to memories and traces of his parents. He is sustained by the thought of his parents, and he allows his sense of them to guide his actions and to shape his morality. They literally guide him in the Priori Incantatem scene described earlier, but Harry’s productive connection to his past is introduced well before this scene occurs. In the first book, *Sorcerer’s Stone*, the Mirror of Erised, which shows whatever one most desires, reflects Harry’s longing to be surrounded by loving family. This scene reinforces a central theme of the series: Harry’s quest for a family, a quest happily realized in the epilogue of the final book. Harry’s development has to do with his search
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for family, and his search relies heavily on traces. In contrast, Voldemort completely disassociates himself from his parents. His mother died giving him life (Rowling offers an echo of Lily’s death—she, too, died to give her son life), but rather than revering her sacrifice, Voldemort disdains her for being so weak as to die. His real animosity, however, is directed at his father, a Muggle. Voldemort takes nothing from his father; he discards his name—rather, he fragments it and reforms it into his alias—and as callously discards his father’s life. Later, he makes use of his father’s bone to give himself a new body, but this is such a perversion of the productive uses of the past we see with Harry that the interaction between Voldemort and the physical trace of his father’s skeleton can only be described as evil.

Horcruxes are an abuse of time and of traces. Voldemort severs himself as completely as he can from his origins and makes traces, not of people from his past or simple memories, but of himself, dividing and diminishing his soul. As he makes Horcruxes, he grows more and more snake-like. As he dehumanizes himself, Voldemort demonstrates how fragmenting one’s self destroys that self. Rowling makes clear through Voldemort’s negative example that identity cannot be forged in isolation but must be built from traces of the past. Voldemort attempts to preserve his strength by preserving himself and by eschewing any sustenance from outside, least of all from the past. In contrast, Harry gains strength as he gathers traces. If Voldemort becomes less human through fragmentation, then Harry becomes more human as he accumulates traces and, through them, magnifies his sense of self. Harry takes strength from traces of his family in the Mirror of Erised, in the gift of his father’s Invisibility Cloak, and in the climactic sequences of the third, fourth, and final books. Rowling introduces a great irony in the sixth book, *Half-Blood Prince*, when Harry even gains strength from Voldemort’s traces; Dumbledore’s archive of memories that reveal the past Voldemort has forgotten becomes the most strategic weapon in Harry’s arsenal.

*Half-Blood Prince* is structured around Harry’s education in Voldemort’s history. Paralleling this education throughout the book is Harry’s experience in his Potions class, where for the first time he is one of the top students. This success is due to Harry’s ability to exploit another trace, the copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* that is heavily annotated with helpful tips that enable Harry to succeed in the class. These annotations prove ethically ambiguous; they give Harry the knowledge he needs to rescue Ron when he is poisoned, yet they teach him the dangerous curse
Sectum Sempra, with which he nearly kills Draco Malfoy. The textbook is a trace of its previous owner, who marked it with his own discoveries. Most literally, it is a palimpsest, one layer of text written over another, and both together teaching Harry what he needs to succeed in Potions. Of course, Harry eventually learns that the book belonged to Severus Snape, and is thus a trace associated with one of the most complex characters in the series. A man motivated above all by the Ricoeurian sense of endurance, he continues to watch over Harry because in him Lily endures, though with a difference that fills Snape with loathing. Harry and Snape’s copy of Advanced Potion-Making is central to Half-Blood Prince because it foregrounds the difficult task of reading a trace whose meaning is not always clear. The potions book marks education as a central theme of this novel and insists on the primacy of learning how to use traces. In Disturbing the Universe, Roberta Seelinger Trites writes convincingly of the central role of power in adolescent fiction: “Although the primary purpose of the adolescent novel may appear to be a depiction of growth, growth in this genre is inevitably represented as being linked to what the adolescent has learned about power” (x). In Harry’s case in Prince, he continues with the lesson he has been learning all along; power comes from knowing how to use traces—when to read the annotation instead of the printed text, and where the enemy is likely to have hidden something special.

Interestingly, much more attention is given in this book to the construction of Voldemort’s identity than to Harry’s. This is because Dumbledore and Harry know that they can best fight Voldemort if they understand him, and they realize that the key to understanding a person is to read him as a trace. What people and events from the past made Voldemort what he is? This is not a question that interests Voldemort, whose sense of identity is atemporal, but Harry understands that he must read Voldemort as a trace if he is to destroy him. Harry spends much of this book dipping into the past and then returning to the present to analyze what he has learned. Not only is this a good educational model, it is also a demonstration, again, of Harry’s ability to use time. In this case, however, he uses time not to know himself but his enemy. It is his knowledge of Voldemort that enables him, in the last book, to locate the Horcruxes and to destroy them, and he calls on details from Voldemort’s past as Tom Riddle in his final encounter with the dark wizard. Voldemort dies because Harry has a weapon he lacks: knowledge of the past and a proper appreciation of traces.
The most explicit representation of Harry using time to know himself comes at the end of *Prisoner of Azkaban*, when he and Hermione use a Time-Turner to travel several hours back in time so that they may save both the Hippogriff Buckbeak and Sirius Black from execution. Hermione has been using the Time-Turner all year to manage an over-loaded course schedule, but has kept her use of the device secret from her friends. When Rowling introduces the object late in this third book of her series, it is our first indication that living people can travel in time in Harry’s world. Riddle’s diary preserved the vestige of a person who emerged in the present, but this is only a distant cousin to time travel. Voldemort was not aware in the present of his Horcrux’s actions or fate, and the Tom Riddle of the past had no contact with his diary-self after creating the Horcrux. The Tom of the diary is a simulacrum, not an actual time-traveling person. In *Goblet of Fire*, Rowling introduces a similar flirtation with time travel: the Pensieve, a memory-storage object that permits anyone to visit an individual’s memory. This also falls short of true time travel, for the visitor only observes the past via the memory—he cannot interact with past people or events. S. James Jakiel and Rosandra Levinthal describe the generic conventions associated with time travel; a particular device transports the traveler instantaneously to another, specified time, where the traveler must adhere to a strict set of rules, one being that history must not be changed. According to this definition, Hermione’s Time-Turner is the first and only true time-travel vehicle in the Harry Potter series, and it behaves much like time-travel devices do generally in fantasy literature.

In “Space, Time, and Magic,” Michael Silberstein describes two views of time that come into play in time travel literature: the tensed view and the tenseless. The tensed view holds that the past has already happened and its events cannot be altered; in contrast, the tenseless view considers past, present, and future to be equally real and concurrent. Thus, a time traveler in a tenseless universe can interact freely with the past, making whatever alterations he likes, while a time traveler in a tensed universe cannot change the past he visits. Of course, it may be the case that a particular individual always traveled to the past, so her presence there is not an anomaly. With this caveat, tensed time travel may involve what is known as the predestination paradox. Also called a causal loop, this paradox allows for a time traveler to change the past if, and only if, that change was always predestined. In *Prisoner
of Azkaban, Rowling seems to use a combination of a tensed view of time and the predestination paradox; past precedes present, but some interference from the present may be a predestined part of the past. All these theories of time travel take as their central concern the problem of changing the past. The Novikov self-consistency principle speaks to this conundrum; it dictates that a time traveler may not do anything to create a paradox. This is also known as the grandfather paradox; one cannot travel in time and kill one’s grandfather, for then the traveler would never have existed, and so the murder could not have taken place—hence, a paradox. Rowling follows the rules of time travel in a broad sense; interestingly, however, her characters are not concerned primarily with avoiding changes to the past—indeed, changing the past is their aim. For Harry and Hermione, the greatest concern is that no one see them out of time.

Not being seen actually seems to be the most important rule in Rowling’s time travel, and in this emphasis, she makes her own mark on time travel conventions. Not interfering with the course of history is usually the most important rule, but here the integrity of the historical narrative is less important than the perception of reality. Dumbledore urges, “But remember this, both of you: you must not be seen. Miss Granger, you know the law—you know what is at stake. . . . You—must—not—be—seen” (Azkaban 393; Rowling’s emphasis). Dumbledore’s insistence that Harry and Hermione must not be seen reinforces the rules that Hermione has been following all year in her quotidian use of the Time-Turner. However, Harry will break this rule, and breaking the rule will save his life. The use of the Time-Turner is expected to result in the release of Buckbeak and Sirius from captivity and certain death, but neither the reader nor the characters anticipate that Harry will use his temporally divided self to save Sirius, Hermione, and himself from Dementors. In the novel’s climax, Harry and Hermione quickly lead Buckbeak away from Hagrid’s hut, leaving the Ministry of Magic executioner to conclude that the Hippogriff has escaped. Silberstein explains that though it seems that Harry and Hermione change the past when they rescue Buckbeak—in time, Buckbeak dies, but in time, Buckbeak lives—it is actually the case that their rescue of the Hippogriff always happened. Thus, he concludes that Rowling seems to offer a tensed view of time. Harry and Hermione do not change the past; rather, their time travel is an integral part of the now achronological sequence of events. And it comes to pass that perhaps the most important thing that happens when they are in the past is that they are in fact seen.
As they wait for the right moment to rescue Sirius from the tower, Harry and Hermione watch Dementors swirling around their past selves. According to Dumbledore’s exhortation, they must not be seen, so there is nothing they can do to save themselves. When this scene occurred in its first iteration, it seemed all hope was lost, when a spectacular Patronus galloped from the forest and drove away the Dementors, thus saving the souls of Harry, Hermione, and Sirius. Harry believes it was his father who conjured the Patronus, although he recognizes how improbable this is:

“I think—” Harry swallowed, knowing how strange this was going to sound. “I think it was my dad.”

Harry glanced up at Hermione and saw that her mouth was fully open now. She was gazing at him with a mixture of alarm and pity.

“Harry, your dad’s—well—dead,” she said quietly. (Azkaban 407; Rowling’s emphasis)

Harry, of course, knows this, but he explains that the figure he saw looked like his dad. In his musings that follow this dialogue, he rationalizes hopefully: Wormtail, once a good friend of his father’s, reappeared that night after many years of being believed dead—could not the same be true for his father? However, Rowling has always been clear that the dead remain dead:

Magic cannot bring dead people back to life; that’s one of the most profound things, the natural law of death applies to wizards as it applies to Muggles and there is no returning once you’re properly dead, you know, they might be able to save very close-to-death people better than we can, by magic that they have certain knowledge we don’t (sic), but once you’re dead, you’re dead. So yeah, I’m afraid there will be no coming back for Harry’s parents. (Interview with Christopher Lydon; emphasis in original)

So, the figure across the lake is not James Potter. It is Harry himself, the Harry of the three-hours-distant future. By going against Dumbledore’s very clear command that they must not be seen, Harry is empowered to save himself and his friends. While Harry may hope to see his father, he likely knows that his parents will never return. He knows the rules of the world in which he lives. Even as he claims that he saw his father, he acknowledges the impossibility of such an occurrence, and with the realization that he could not have seen his father, he finds the internal strength to save himself.
Harry watches the Dementors approach the lake and he eagerly looks for his father. Eventually, he realizes his father is not there: “And then it hit him—he understood. He hadn’t seen his father—he had seen himself—” (411; Rowling’s emphasis). Harry then conjures a magnificent Patronus, which takes the form of his father’s Animagus, a stag. Because we are looking for James Potter and because we come to find out that he transformed into a stag at will, we recognize Harry’s stag Patronus as a trace, a remnant of his deceased father that endures with renewed life in the present. This stag is no ghost; it is an active manifestation of Harry’s strength and of his will, shaped perhaps by his father but nonetheless his own. When the stag comes back to Harry after scattering the Dementors, Harry has a brief moment of contact with the magical trace of his father; it is a trace that only Harry could bring into existence, and he does so because of the conflation of his past and present selves. Harry later explains to Hermione: “I knew I could do it this time. . . . because I’d already done it” (412). Here, Harry nicely articulates the predestination paradox. He broke the rules of the Time-Turner and allowed his past self to see his present self. It may seem that the conjunction of selves would suggest Rowling offers a tenseless view of time travel, in contrast to Silberstein’s argument discussed above, but the sequence of selves is important. It matters a great deal to Harry that he “had already done it.” This assertion of the past tense keeps time in order even if past and present do meet briefly. In this odd re-membering of selves, Harry finds the power to perform an advanced magical act. There are two key parts to this equation: Harry’s skillful manipulation of time enables him to conjure the Patronus, and the Patronus itself connects Harry to his origins, to his father.

The Patronus Harry produces is corporeal and takes the form of a stag. Harry had learned earlier in *Azkaban* that his father was an Animagus—a wizard who can assume the form of an animal—and that his nickname was Prongs. Harry does not realize his father’s Animagus was a stag until his own Patronus appears and makes plain that, like so many physical features, he also shares with his father this outward manifestation of an inner strength. We never learn if Harry’s stag Patronus is actually the same as the stag James could become or is simply a product of Harry’s imagination: but in either case, for Harry it represents a strong, physical connection to his father. In *The Half-Blood Prince*, we learn that a person can change the form of his or her Patronus as a result of trauma or some strong emotional connection. Tonks’s Patronus changes to resemble the werewolf form of Remus Lupin, who will eventually become her husband. In the final book of the
series, we learn that Snape’s Patronus is a doe, modeled on that of Lily Potter, whom he loved. Rowling thus gives us evidence to substantiate the claim that a Patronus is a manifestation of one’s emotional self, and it thus seems most likely that the stag is a product of Harry’s imagination. Harry’s stag Patronus is at once a sign of his magical ability in the present and a trace of his dead father. It is a trace that Harry makes, and this odd crafting in the present of a trace that connects the crafter to the past is one example of the temporal complexity Rowling uses to show Harry’s emotional development. He overcomes his fear and, relying simultaneously on his sense of his father and his own magical strength, saves himself. This scene is especially important, for it is the one in which Harry most explicitly manipulates time; it is also the first time Harry faces an extraordinary threat and defeats it by himself.

The strength Harry demonstrates in producing such an impressive Patronus shows not only magical ability but also emotional development, because one must rely on happy thoughts to produce a Patronus. Harry thus shows the ability to control his mind. A Patronus is most often used to ward off Dementors, whose mode of attack is to suck out the victim’s soul. As the Dementors approach, the victim revisits his worst memory—another modified form of time travel, akin to the Pensieve. In Harry’s case, he hears the dying cries of his parents, so the reclamation of his parents—finding in them strength rather than weakness—is especially important. The spiritual vampirism of the Dementors is combated by the manifestation of a wizard’s happiest memory—this is what one must think of in order to produce a Patronus—yet for Harry, the stag is not a memory but a more tenuous fantasy of what his father must have been. It is a trace, albeit a counterfeit one, and Harry’s ability to conjure that trace demonstrates his complicated relationship to the past. Harry’s Patronus recalls his father but is not him; it comes from Harry in the present yet derives its power from his productive connection to his past. To define himself and to save himself, Harry not only relies on real traces of his parents, like moving photographs or family heirlooms; he also conjures a trace that is an example of good magic as well as an expression of his productive manipulation of time.

In her 2005 essay, Kate Behr describes a psychoanalytic approach to narrative transformation in which it is perceptions of relationships and their dynamics (rather than desires) that are changed over the course of a narrative: “such a shift in relationship creates ‘same-as-difference’ and we see it occurring throughout the *Harry Potter* books” (113). Behr
does not reference the trace, but Derrida echoes in this poststructuralist discourse; the trace is the same in that it is connected to something from the past, but it is different in that it no longer exists in its moment of origin, and it means differently as it passes through time. I refer again to the changing significance of the Resurrection Stone, laden with meaning and the possibility of making meaning. A similar example is another one of the Hallows, Harry’s Invisibility Cloak. Like Marvolo Gaunt’s ring, the cloak is an interesting and important heirloom; it belonged to Harry’s father and to a long line of ancestors stretching back to Ignotus Peverell. As a trace, then, the cloak and the ring are both artifacts from the same family, and their continued significance long past the lifetimes of their original owners likely has, for Rowling, an antecedent in Mitford’s preface quoted above. The Invisibility Cloak is a material object that connects Harry to his ancestral past, yet it obviously has considerable value in his immediate present. For six of the seven books in the series, the cloak has only a vague history—Harry knows it was his father’s—and plays a significant role in many adventures of the present. Only in the final book does the cloak’s function as a trace become clear.

It is important to note that the Invisibility Cloak is a trace that enables Harry to obscure his identity at will. Thus, unlike many other traces that become part of Harry’s identity, this particular trace contributes to his growth by allowing him temporarily to erase himself from view. Using a trace to be the same but different is consistent with Behr’s reading of narrative transformation. Behr uses as one example Harry’s transformed perception of his father over the course of the series (117), offering a way to bring together trace and identity. Harry makes sense of his world, as we all do, by interpreting signs. When those signs are traces from the past, we see that he shapes his identity based on his understanding of the past. He is very much like his father; he learns this early and folds it into his sense of himself. Yet he eventually sees his father in a less positive light and then strives to be different: a trace of his father, yet a trace that means differently.

When Harry sees himself across the lake, he thinks he sees his father. Later he learns it was himself that he saw, but he was also right in the first instance; he sees his father in himself. Dumbledore affirms Harry’s experience. He reiterates the cliché about Harry looking like his father—“I expect you’ll tire of hearing it, but you do look extraordinarily like James” (Azkaban 27; Rowling’s emphasis)—and then adds, “You know, Harry, in a way, you did see your father last night. . . .
You found him inside yourself” (428). James and Lily Potter are dead in Harry’s present, but traces of them emerge again and again, and they are written poignantly on Harry’s face. In Harry, James and Lily endure; like the stag, Harry signifies his parents though he can never really make them appear.

**Harry as a Trace**

Rowling reminds the reader that Harry bears a striking resemblance to his father; new acquaintances repeatedly remark on how Harry looks like James, though he has Lily’s eyes. The first time Hagrid speaks to Harry, he observes, “Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh’ve got your mum’s eyes” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 47). Harry sees the resemblance for himself when he views his father in the Mirror of Erised later in *Sorcerer’s Stone*: “[His father] wore glasses, and his hair was very untidy. It stuck up in the back, just as Harry’s did” (208). Rowling’s attention to this resemblance foregrounds the child as a trace of his parents, a key theme that runs throughout the books. All children carry forward from the past physical characteristics, names, stories, habits learned, and, as Voldemort’s followers are quick to observe, blood. Harry takes comfort and strength from his biological connection to parents he does not remember, and this importance does not diminish as the books progress through his years at Hogwarts. On several occasions, Harry seeks out traces of his parents. The Mirror of Erised offers one such opportunity, and, in *Azkaban*, Harry perversely relishes the chance to hear his parents’ voices when the Dementors approach him. He even manages to eavesdrop on Snape’s memory of his parents, an experience that complicates his idealization of his father. In her work on the Pensieve and memory in the series, LuAnn McCracken Fletcher observes that Snape uses the Pensieve to facilitate emotional repression; Harry, in contrast, seeks counsel to address the confusion he feels after encountering a negative view of his father in the Pensieve. This is yet another example of Harry negotiating a healthy relationship to the past in contrast to Snape and, more extremely, Voldemort. Fletcher surely will revisit her argument in light of Snape’s dying act in the final book, in which he passes on to Harry a moving series of memories that reveal his abiding love for Lily Potter. Indeed, Snape asks Harry to look at him—surely so that he may look one last time into those eyes. Thus, while it is the resemblance to his father that is most often commented upon, it may well be Harry having his mother’s eyes that ultimately makes the most difference.
Harry clearly values the connection to his parents, and he recognizes that he is himself a signifier of their lives, both physically and in terms of his behavior. He is an outstanding Quidditch player, as was his father; in *Half-Blood Prince*, he demonstrates skill in potions, which marks him as like his mother. Even in his relationships, Harry seems a trace of his parents; most notably, the relationship Harry develops with Sirius, his godfather, is recognized by many to be much like that Sirius had with James. On more than one occasion, adults accuse Sirius of having difficulty distinguishing Harry from James. Sirius is characterized more than once as reckless, and this conflation of Harry and James—a misappropriation of a trace—is part of this reckless behavior. That Voldemort is not the only character to misuse traces is consistent with Rowling’s portrayal throughout the series of a complex moral landscape. Early in *Phoenix*, Molly Weasley angrily exclaims, “He’s not *James, Sirius*” (89; Rowling’s emphasis). Mrs. Weasley continues: “Sometimes, the way you talk about him, it’s as though you think you’ve got your best friend back!”

The attention to Harry’s connection to his parents, in particular to his function as a trace of their lives, is not unique in the series. Rowling crafts a complex wizarding genetics that places the notion of biological traces at the forefront. Individuals are defined and valued, by some, according to their blood connections to wizards, Muggles, or both. Not only does Harry have his mother’s eyes; he also has her blood, which happens to be Muggle blood. Rowling first introduces the concept of wizarding parentage and how one inherits a wizarding identity in the first book, when Harry’s new Gryffindor classmates identify themselves either as having one or two Muggle parents or being from a full-blooded wizarding family. For instance, Seamus Finnigan is a half-blood whose Muggle father abandoned his mother when her identity became clear, and Hermione is, of course, Muggle-born. Blood status in the wizarding world becomes a major plot point in *Chamber of Secrets*, in which Rowling introduces the derogatory terms “Mudblood,” a wizard born of Muggle parents (more politely called a “Muggle-born”), and “blood traitor,” a pureblood wizard who befriends Muggle-borns. We learn that Voldemort himself is a half-blood, and the fierce antagonism of certain Slytherins, notably Draco Malfoy, toward those who are Muggle-born becomes a defining characteristic of Slytherin House and ultimately proves to be a central source of conflict when the Dark wizards return to power in the final books of the series.
Literary critics and biologists alike have commented on the genetics Rowling devises and foregrounds. A 2005 article in *Nature* describes using wizarding genetics to teach the recessive allele in biology, and *The New York Times* followed suit with its own take on “The Genetic Theory of *Harry Potter*.” Suman Gupta connects the emphasis on blood purity in the series with fascism, noting that Rowling adds dimension to the fascist preoccupation with blood and heredity because in the wizarding world blood has more than symbolic value. He explains: “To the wizard fascist blood is not simply a symbolic signifier of race that acquires irrational and arbitrary significance . . . in the Dark Arts blood all too materially matters. . . . It is a potent and magically real agent” (108; Gupta’s emphasis). The issue of blood as a trace is complex in the Harry Potter series, and an examination of it will serve to strengthen the connection between traces, identity, and time.

Blood proves extraordinarily potent not only in terms of reading an individual wizard as a trace of his parents, but also in the taking on of magical properties that are themselves traces of what has come before. When Voldemort attacked James and Lily Potter, he sought only to murder James and Harry; Lily sacrificed herself in an attempt to save Harry’s life, and this sacrifice, motivated by love, gave Harry his mother’s protection. At the end of *Sorcerer’s Stone*, Dumbledore explains why Quirrell, possessed by Voldemort, was unable to touch Harry:

> Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn’t realize that love as powerful as your mother’s love for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign . . . to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection for ever. It is in your very skin. (299)

Dumbledore makes an implicit contrast between the trace of Lily’s love and the more visibly present trace of Voldemort’s hatred: the scar on Harry’s forehead. The whole wizarding world knows that Harry bears the trace of the Dark Lord’s enmity and also of his failure—the scar signifies at once Voldemort’s power and his weakness—but the trace of Lily’s love is invisible and much more potent. Harry carries the trace of his mother’s love, forging a stronger connection between them, but also shaping the trace that is his own identity. Harry is a function of his parents biologically and emotionally, and his identity is based on these traces. Importantly, it is also based on his acceptance of the connection to his parents. Harry seeks out information about them, and he
embraces opportunities for connection. In marked contrast, Voldemort murderously rejects the traces that connect him to family and to the past. He turns them into Hocruxes, receptacles for fragments of his own soul, rather than meaningful connectors to the past. Voldemort makes himself, whereas Harry values greatly his identity as a child of parents who, to a certain degree, make him who he is. He is who he is because of who his parents were and—beyond mere genetics—how they acted, but Harry also makes himself. He conjures the Patronus himself. He duels Voldemort himself. He is a trace of his parents—a signifier of them, yet with his own distinct life in the present.

_Voldemort—An (Unwitting) Trace_

Perhaps the most important trace in Harry’s life is that of Lily’s love. Her protection serves him well at several key junctures, but it also becomes a desirable object, which Voldemort attempts to steal in *Goblet of Fire* when a drop of Harry’s blood is used to give him new life. He recognizes the power of Lily and Harry’s bond, and he contrives to strengthen himself by taking that bond from Harry’s blood. Thus, he acquires for himself some of the protection that had shielded Harry from his Killing Curse. An examination of Voldemort’s rebirth at the end of *Goblet of Fire* reveals striking similarities between the conclusion of this book and that of *Prisoner of Azkaban*; in both, the climax hinges on a character’s ability to craft a trace and make use of it in the establishment of his own identity. Harry conjures the stag that is at once his father and himself, and makes use of this trace as he launches himself to a new level of wizarding ability and a parallel sense of strengthening identity—he knows his father is a part of him, but he is also his own person. Voldemort quite literally makes himself at the end of *Goblet*. At his bidding, Peter Pettigrew brews a potion that contains his own flesh, the bone of Voldemort’s father, and the blood of Voldemort’s enemy—Harry. This collection of traces is striking. Voldemort, like Harry, forges his own identity out of the trace of his father, but Voldemort’s self-making is dark and cruel and based on loathing rather than longing. And Voldemort takes also a trace of Harry, a trace particularly important for it is also a trace of Lily.

Yet Harry’s blood is more than just the blood of an enemy, for as Pettigrew points out early in *Goblet*, almost any wizard’s blood would fit that definition. Voldemort responds that only Harry’s blood will do: “I have my own reasons for using the boy, as I have already explained
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to you, and I will use no other” (10). Voldemort later explains to his followers how the magic worked: “[Harry’s] mother left upon him the traces of her sacrifice... This is old magic, I should have remembered it” (652–53). He comes to the present, describing the need of “the blood of a foe”: “I wanted Harry Potter’s blood. I wanted the blood of the one who had stripped me of power thirteen years ago... for the lingering protection his mother once gave him would then reside in my veins too” (656–57). Voldemort correctly anticipates that he can take for himself the “traces of [Lily’s] sacrifice” and in so doing rebuild his body and his power. Thus, one of the traces most fundamental to Harry’s identity becomes central also to Voldemort’s; they share Lily’s protection just as they share the cores of their wands. Yet, this protective trace is more complicated than Voldemort knew. We learn in Deathly Hallows that when Voldemort took Lily’s protection for himself, he inadvertently strengthened Harry, keeping him alive as long as Voldemort himself lives. Dumbledore explains: “He took your blood believing it would strengthen him. He took into his body a tiny part of the enchantment your mother laid upon you when she died for you. His body keeps her sacrifice alive, and while the enchantment survives, so do you...” (710). Oddly, Voldemort becomes himself a trace of Lily’s love, but because he does not know love and he does not understand how to make use of the past, the trace within Voldemort benefits Harry and ultimately leads Voldemort to destroy himself. There is a wonderful irony to the respective positions of Harry and Voldemort at the end of the series: Voldemort perversely preserves Lily’s enchantment—he is a trace of her love—and Harry, horribly, is a Horcrux, a bit of Voldemort’s soul having been accidentally blasted into him. This inversion makes plain how strong Harry must be in the end; like his mother, he must allow his own destruction—a sacrifice he is emboldened to make, in part, because he knows his own traces will endure.

“We Are Part of You”

The scene at the end of Goblet of Fire in which Harry’s and Voldemort’s wands connect follows the resurrection of Voldemort; Rowling’s construction of Priori Incantatem reinforces how essential Harry’s origins are to his survival in the present, yet it also presents Harry’s past with a difference. The trace endures, yet it is understood differently in the present from how it was in its moment of origin. The shadow of James Potter is able to engage with Harry’s dire present and advise him to
run at a particular moment; he exists in the present, yet he is of the past. Rowling embraces the continued life of the trace in her depiction of the Potters and other shadows that emerge from Voldemort’s wand. That is, the figures do not simply re-enact their final moments, as one might expect given the nature of Priori Incantatem. Instead, they emerge and engage with Harry in the present. The shadow of Cedric asks Harry to return his body to his parents, and Frank Bryce encourages Harry to defeat the dark wizard. James tells Harry, “When the connection is broken, we will linger for only moments . . . but we will give you time” (667).

The shadow trace of James Potter articulates the use Harry makes of traces: “we will give you time.” With this gift, Harry builds himself and his exceptional wizarding ability on a solid foundation of family, past, and traces that bring family into the present. He learns to use knowledge of history to strengthen himself and to weaken Voldemort. When the story comes to its grand close at the end of *Deathly Hallows*, Rowling revisits the Priori Incantatem scene. The Resurrection Stone calls back into being those whom Harry has lost:

They were neither ghost nor truly flesh, he could see that. They resembled most closely the Riddle that had escaped from the diary so long ago, and he had been memory made nearly solid. Less substantial than living bodies, but much more than ghosts, they moved toward him, and on each face, there was the same loving smile. (698–99)

With this description, Rowling evokes the trace: it is a remnant of the past, less substantial than what it signifies but something more than a ghost. When Harry asks the assembled traces if Voldemort will be able to see them, Sirius, who had dangerously misunderstood traces while alive, answers wisely: “We are part of you” (700). Harry has made himself out of the traces of those who have loved him, and he, in turn, is a trace of their love and their lives. This second appearance of the shadow traces differs importantly from the first because Harry has already been given time and has learned how to use it. He has already made his choices and has made himself. The traces of his parents and of Sirius support and affirm him: “their presence was his courage, and the reason he was able to keep putting one foot in front of the other” (700). This time, they do not enable him to run away, but to walk confidently to face his enemy and death.
In facing death, Harry makes a final commitment to time. Voldemort sees no value in the Resurrection Stone, whereas Harry uses it in what he believes to be his final moments. He calls into the present traces of those he loved who have passed and are of the past. He takes strength from their love and from the firm knowledge that he is their trace. Then, he turns from them to face Voldemort and death. He can do this because he has found strength in his relationship with the past. He finally vanquishes Voldemort because his enemy never thought of the Resurrection Stone, because he didn’t value his own mother’s love, because he didn’t understand Snape’s feelings for Lily, because he destroyed his own father and grandparents—he saw no value in the trace. For Harry, life is built of traces, and as we finally see in the names of his children—James, Albus, and Lily—he passes that knowledge on into the future.

Notes

1Roberta Seelinger Trites notes the important role photographs play in treatments of death in adolescent literature generally, and she mentions The Prisoner of Azkaban specifically. She claims, “The photograph of his father is particularly influential in helping Harry reconcile himself to his parents’ death . . .” (Disturbing 118–19).

2When Rowling named her daughter Jessica after Mitford, she crafted the sort of trace that she brings to the epilogue of Deathly Hallows, when we learn the names of Harry’s children.

3Whether or not this is actually Dumbledore is an important question that is beyond the scope of this paper. It should be noted, though, that however we interpret the representation of Dumbledore here, the explanation for Voldemort’s inability to appreciate the Resurrection Stone comes from deep within Harry’s consciousness.

4The locket was placed by Regulus Black in the cave in lieu of the Horcrux-locket hidden there by Voldemort; it proves useful in winning the loyalty of the house-elf Kreacher. The mirror was a gift from Sirius, and Harry carries it as a reminder of both his relationship with his godfather and of his having failed Sirius. It eventually turns out that Aberforth Dumbledore has the partner mirror and uses it to keep an eye on Harry, enabling him to send help when all hope seems lost.

5We discover in Half-Blood Prince that a memory can be modified; by inserting a falsified and clearly artificial scene into his memory, Horace Slughorn attempts to obscure the fact that he was the person who introduced Tom Riddle to Horcruxes. However, this is a manipulation of the record of the past (in the form of a bottled memory), not of the past itself, and is easily spotted and ultimately fails to obscure the truth.

6In Time Travel in Einstein’s Universe, J. Richard Gott offers a clear discussion of the Novikov self-consistency principle.

7Harry repeatedly breaks rules in each book of the series. For more on Harry Potter’s morality and rule breaking, see Kern; Trites, “Harry Potter Novels”; and Whited and Grimes.

8Silberstein notes that Alfonso Cuarón, the director of the film version of Prisoner of Azkaban, makes this plain when he shows the frustrated executioner swinging his axe into a pumpkin; the noise we assumed signaled Buckbeak’s death was caused by another action altogether (196).
The rarity of Harry’s ability to produce a corporeal Patronus at such a young age is emphasized in *Order of the Phoenix*, when the subject causes impressed murmurs during Harry’s trial early in the book and again when the Patronus itself canters through the examining room during the all-important O.W.L. exams and wins applause from the examiner.

Of course, Harry demonstrates great bravery and presence of mind in the climactic battles of the first two books, but in both struggles he receives assistance from Dumbledore. The Headmaster arrives just as Harry loses consciousness at the end of *Sorcerer’s Stone*, and Harry’s unwavering loyalty to Dumbledore in *Chamber of Secrets* summons the sword of Godric Gryffindor, which enables him to slay the Basilisk. In the third book, *Azkaban*, for the first time the means of destroying the enemy comes from within Harry, and is a manifestation of his own strength.

When Harry is learning to produce a Patronus, he suffers through the echoes of his parents’ deaths. A part of him likes to hear the echoes because they bring him into contact with his parents, yet even at thirteen, Harry knows this is foolish. He reprimands himself: “They’re dead and listening to echoes of them won’t bring them back” (*Azkaban* 243).

It is noteworthy that we never see Voldemort conjure a Patronus: What would be a happy memory for him, and how could he possibly produce a trace that connected him to anything outside himself?

I must note that for the literal manipulation of time, Hermione deserves the credit. However, Harry needed to do more than go back in time: once he time traveled, he needed to confront his past self with this present self, and for this manipulation of identity the credit is his alone.

There is no model in Rowling of adoption, in which case children may not carry their parents’ blood but certainly carry other qualities and are traces just as biological children are.

Andrew Blake similarly aligns attention to bloodline with racism and with fascism, but he goes on to argue that Rowling belies her liberal stance with the repeatedly expressed prejudice against Muggles, who do not have magical ability and thus, Blake argues, are disabled and seen as weak and foolish in consequence (106). However, Rowling makes the problematics of asserting wizard supremacy over Muggles forcefully plain in *Deathly Hallows*.

**Works Cited**

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