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Stones and Souls: The Function of Alchemy in Modern Young Adult Fantasy

Keywords

Stones, Souls, Alchemy, Young Adult Fantasy

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Introduction

In the minds of people who lived about five hundred years ago, the concept of alchemy wasn't a fanciful legend; it was a seriously practiced science that held the promise of turning lead into gold, mortals into immortals, and even decaying remains into fully-revived human ings. However, to most people today, these once-sacred alchemic notions now tend to seem at once laughably implausible and completely obsolete. Indeed, in the same way that Latin is often thought of as a "dead" language, alchemy is often thought of as a "dead" tradition—an old-world magic that became irrelevant the minute modern science came in and debunked the possibility of its existence. Still, although alchemy is undoubtedly impossible, the practice's most basic principle—taking lackluster raw materials and turning them into something far greater—continues to exist and thrive in today's works of fiction, giving protagonists and villains alike an outlet to defy death, wield supernatural power, and recover what they've lost.

Specifically, alchemic themes have a particularly strong presence in two widely-beloved young adult literary gems: *Harry Potter*, a whimsical coming-of-age British novel series about an orphaned wizard; and *Fullmetal Alchemist*, a steampunk war manga series about two teenage brothers employed by their fictional country's alchemically-driven military. At first glance, it might seem to readers none the wiser that these two stories have nothing in common with each other—and that they have nothing to offer beyond escapist entertainment—but it's uncanny how similar and sophisticated they are, alchemic overlaps notwithstanding. Firstly, J.K. Rowling and Hiromu Arakawa—the two respective authors of the above series—are both extremely successful female writers whose publishers initially forced them to take on ambiguously gendered pen names in order to appeal to an expected male/teenage demographic. Additionally, although both series were conceived and carried out on

different sides of the world, they were written around the same time: the original British version of the first *Harry Potter* novel debuted in 1997, with its seventh and final book published worldwide in 2007; the original Japanese chapter of the first volume of *Fullmetal Alchemist* debuted in August 2001, with a new chapter of its eventual total of 108 published monthly until June 2010. Regarding the two series' plots, they share several general arcs: both deal with flashback accidents that caused people to lose their original bodies (Lord Voldemort's attempted murder of *Harry Potter*, and the Elric brothers' failed attempt at reviving their dead mother); and both deal with a proposed genocide of a supposedly inferior race (pure-blooded wizards against non-magical people [muggles] and immortal Homunculi against regular humans). Above all, the most striking similarity between these two series is a mutual fascination with and exploitation of alchemical items—primarily the legendary Philosopher's Stone—that help to uncover the workings of the soul.

Part 1: Alchemy in History

To those who have read the first *Harry Potter* novel and/or even just a few chapters of Arakawa's manga, the Philosopher's Stone will have become a very familiar and distinguished object. After all, it's the life force that could've granted Voldemort a newly immortal body (were he to be given the chance to use the stone), and it's the driving force that promises to restore Edward and Alphonse Elric's natural human bodies (should they manage to obtain a stone for themselves). Before either of these stories came into the world, though—way, *way* before—the Philosopher's Stone existed as powerful legend at the heart of real-world alchemic theory. In *Alchemy: Ancient and Modern*, H.S. Redgrove writes that “Alchemy is generally understood to have been that art whose end was the transmutation of the so-called base metals into gold by means of an ill-defined something called the Philosopher's Stone” (1). Indeed, as the vagueness in Redgrove's writing implies, part of what makes this object so intriguing is that there *is* no absolute, consistent fact of what it's called, where it's from, or how it works; the legends and rumors vary from retelling to retelling. For instance, it's known as *the Sorcerer's Stone* in all American editions of Rowling's first novel, but the Stone—which will be used as a working shorthand from here on out—also went by other names in different instances. (A popular alternative is

the “Elixir of Life” or “Elixir of Longevity.”) In fact, sometimes it isn’t even portrayed as a *stone*; certain storytellers depict it as a potion or as a solid-liquid hybrid, as Arakawa does in her drawings. On top of that, the understanding of the Stone’s origins has also evolved. While *Fullmetal Alchemist* lore states that the Stone is created by sacrificing multiple human lives, actual researchers seem to have thought that easy-to-find, non-essential bodily ingredients could do it. Indeed, Lawrence M. Principe’s *The Secrets of Alchemy* illustrates this theory by mentioning different alchemic recipes that call for things like salt, hair, and even urine—all of which could supposedly lead to the formation of the Stone (119).

Most notably, though, aside from producing gold, as Redgrove has it, the Stone has also been linked to medicine as an object thought to heal the sick or wounded, bring the dead back to life, and/or keep people from dying at all. It seems to be this last purpose with which practitioners, wishful commoners, and monarchs were most fascinated. Especially given that this idea of creating immortality came about in a time when life spans were depressingly short and disease frighteningly prevalent, it only makes sense that people would want to find some way out of their bleak fates, and so they turned to the practice of alchemy as a last-ditch and often spiritually-taboo way of defying the course of nature. Indeed, perhaps the most famous among all alchemic scholars is Nicholas Flamel—a man fictionalized as a centuries-old creator of the Stone in *Harry Potter* but who lived from the mid-14th to the early-15th century as a desperate, fruitless seeker of the Stone and its powers. According to Don Keck DuPree in “Nicholas Flamel: The Alchemist Who Lived,” the real-life alchemist in question wanted to find the Stone not only “to bring his wife, Perenelle, back from the dead and gain immortality for himself” but also “to create gold for him to do good works” (74). Interestingly, unlike the common scenario of someone researching alchemy *solely* to make themselves rich or live forever, Flamel seems to have had multiple, morally-conflicting motivations for going after the Stone. He wanted to defy death, but only so that he could bring back his beloved wife. He wanted to learn how to make endless amounts of gold, but only so that he could enrich the lives of the poor people around him. Taking these facts into account, it’s hard to say definitively whether he was *justified* in wanting to find and use the Stone. However, his case study still illustrates that dabbling in alchemy almost always involves some amount of moral transgression on the part of the alchemist—an issue that will be discussed in much more detail

later with regards to Rowling's and Arakawa's works.

After all, as prominent as the story is in today's pop-culture, the Philosopher's Stone and the pursuit thereof isn't the only aspect of alchemic theory worth mentioning. One often overlooked but important detail is that even though it never produced anything tangible, just *practicing* alchemy allowed old-world researchers to hone a sort of basis for modern-day science. Indeed, in *Disknowledge: Literature, Alchemy, and the End of Humanism in Renaissance England* Katherine Eggert states that "alchemy lent method, if not quite yet science, to what would become the scientific method of hypothesis and experiment" (4). Still, for all the empirical exploration that alchemy kick-started—and all the financial and medicinal rewards it promised to help people reap—Eggert maintains that alchemy was far from being a perfect, universally accepted practice.

At first, this perspective might seem counterintuitive; after all, how could something so *hopeful* possibly be bad? Firstly, the advertised "alchemists" who went around peddling such addictive ideas to overly-eager customers—only to leave them penniless and as mortal as ever— inadvertently stigmatized their own craft. As Eggert puts it, "by the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the very word *alchemy* was convenient shorthand for obfuscation, misguided learning, and outright scams" (5). Secondly (and more importantly), to some religiously moral sticklers, it didn't matter how supposedly noble or widely-beneficial one's goal with alchemy was; just the very *pursuit* of alchemy—and all the lucrative, death-defying trimmings that came with it—was an unforgivable act of avarice that would essentially curse whoever was bold enough to attempt it. DuPree emphasizes this point by mentioning the true story of a man named Marco Bragadino—an early modern Italian alchemist who initially made a fortune selling useless "miracle" drugs to a gullible, infertile woman. The scammer later got his comeuppance when he was jailed and then beheaded for trying to make a customer out of a duke who eventually saw through Bragadino's tricks (80-81). Regarding Bragadino's story, DuPree remarks that "Clearly, approaching alchemy and the Philosopher's Stone with cynical or self-seeking motives could rebound on the alchemist" (81). Indeed, never is this statement truer than with regards to the plots of both *Harry Potter* and *Fullmetal Alchemist*, wherein several main characters—protagonists and antagonists alike—consistently face dire consequences for daring to toy with the promising but damning power of alchemy.

Part 2: *Harry Potter* and the Temptation of Immortality

As many dedicated readers might testify, one of the reasons the *Harry Potter* series is so compelling is because it consistently imparts a plethora of life lessons to its readers: that circumstances of birth and potential for greatness have nothing to do with each other; that there is always a silver lining in every horrible situation; that the ability *to* love and *be* loved is the greatest power there is. However, as inspiring as these books tend to be, they also feature plenty of dark, cautionary, hard-to-swallow lessons as well, and among these is a very important one that is also driven home in Arakawa's manga series. In short, playing with, running from, or trying to come back from death *never* works out for the people who try—and there are plenty of means through which people try, most notably the aforementioned Philosopher's Stone.

Although it plays a much smaller role in *Harry Potter* than it does in *Fullmetal Alchemist* (it's only featured in the first book and very briefly mentioned in the sixth and seventh), the Stone still has a significant amount of lore surrounding it within Rowling's novels. For one thing, as one of Hermione's schoolbooks points out in the series' first novel, *The Sorcerer's Stone*, "*the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicholas Flamel [...] who celebrated his six-hundred-and-sixty-fifth birthday last year*"—which, eerily enough, is just a year shy of reaching 666, a satanic number in Christianity (220). Just from this fact alone, it's obvious that the Stone is an extremely rare and powerful item that can work death-defying wonders for its owner. However, those wonders don't come easily; after all, as Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore mentions to Harry five books later in *The Half-Blood Prince*, "[the Stone] must be drunk regularly, for all eternity, if the drinker is to maintain their immortality"—which means that the Stone, while effective in keeping drinkers alive, isn't at all reliable or foolproof and is a very inconvenient way to go about becoming immortal (502). Still, despite these shortcomings, the Stone is the first thing that the very desperate, bodiless Voldemort goes after to try to rebuild himself after killing Harry's parents and losing his original form in *The Sorcerer's Stone*. At this early point in the story, though, he's not looking to extend his life as is; he just wants to have an independent, solidified body again—which, all things considered, is arguably the tamest, *least* evil thing he tries to do

throughout the entire series and should not be enough yet to give alchemic karma a reason to punish him. Nevertheless, the fact remains that getting a new body, while not a pursuit that hurts someone else, is still something that Voldemort wants to do for *himself*. So, the Stone—wired through the Mirror of Erised (the backwards spelling of “desire”) to give itself up only to people who want to “find it, but not use it”—is only accessible to Harry, a boy who merely wants to keep the Stone from Voldemort long enough to bring it back to Dumbledore for safekeeping (300).

Interestingly, this representation of the Stone seems to be unique to the world of *Harry Potter*. After all, in most other fictional representations of the object—in *Fullmetal Alchemist*, too—anyone who *wants* to use it *can* use it at the risk of his or her own moral guilt. Here, though, because no one but Flamel and his wife actually gets the opportunity to drink from the Stone in the first place, it’s not portrayed to be as nearly damning or dangerous an item as it usually is. Still, by the end of *The Sorcerer’s Stone*, Dumbledore has realized that “the Stone was really not such a wonderful thing” and works with Flamel to have the only known Stone destroyed, leaving the ancient alchemist to die naturally and the shattered soul of Voldemort to continue seeking a way to create a new body for himself (297).

However, even though Voldemort goes without a physical form for a long time (he doesn’t get one until he performs a sacrificial blood ceremony at the end of the fourth book, *The Goblet of Fire*), this ethereal essence of the Dark Lord initially doesn’t have to worry about dying out, owing his resilient existence to a seven-part backup plan that he’s had in place for many years and has gone to extreme lengths to protect: his collection of Horcruxes. First brought up in a flashback in *The Half-Blood Prince* by the very impressionable master of potions Horace Slughorn to the very curious teenaged student Tom Riddle (Voldemort’s original name), Horcruxes are, as Slughorn reveals, “object[s] in which a person has concealed part of their soul” (497). Such a description may seem innocent enough, but Slughorn soon goes on to explain that making use of such a resource doesn’t come without cost. After all, as he mentions, “Splitting [the soul] is an act of violation, it is against nature” (498). Not only that, but murder is required to make a Horcrux, and according to Slughorn, murder is “the supreme act of evil [...] Killing rips the soul apart” (498). This fact, combined with their outright unholiness, causes Horcruxes to be considered one of the vilest forms of magic in the wizarding world. Just *considering*

taking advantage of such a shady practice is understandably unfathomable to most wizards. After all, the Horcruxes aren't an explicit form of alchemy *per se*, but like traditional alchemic items, they still require sacrifice and constitute an unnatural tampering with the soul, so they're feared by most people and are never handled by the faint-of-heart. To Tom Riddle, though—someone who has always feared death above anything else—the Horcruxes are an irresistible and seemingly fail-safe method for him to obtain immortality and invincibility, and so he has absolutely no qualms about creating one for himself.

In fact, after hearing what can be accomplished with just *one* Horcrux, Tom presses the idea much further than probably anyone else before him had thought to do, slyly suggesting “Wouldn't it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces, I mean, for instance, isn't seven the most powerfully magical number [...]?” (498). Indeed, despite Slughorn's warnings, creating multiple Horcruxes is exactly what Tom pursues, purposely infusing six different pieces of his fractured, morally-ruined soul into his own diary and other personal items that belonged to three out of the four Hogwarts founders (he never manages to make a Horcrux out of any of Godric Gryffindor's possessions) as well as his obedient pet snake Nagini. Afterwards, having created his half-dozen Horcruxes and placed what he was *sure* were impenetrable layers of protection around them, Tom/Voldemort foolishly lets his guard down, deluded into thinking that he's now impervious to any kind of retaliation. As he slowly and painfully comes to realize, though, the Horcruxes are far from being flawless safe havens for his soul, seeing as—in the final novel *The Deathly Hallows*—Harry and his friends *do* find ways to obtain and destroy the Horcruxes, poisoning, stabbing, and burning them one by one until all that's left to go after is Voldemort himself. What's more, in addition to the aforementioned Horcruxes, Voldemort unwittingly stores a seventh Horcrux inside *Harry Potter* himself the night that he attacks baby Harry and his parents. Unfortunately for the Dark Lord, though, this accident ultimately sets him up to kill off a vital part of *himself* when, in *The Deathly Hallows*, he casts a failed *Avada Kedavra* killing curse at Harry that only attacks the Horcrux and not the life of his most dangerous rival.

So, although at first they appear to offer Voldemort a surefire way to escape death, the Horcruxes turn out to be just as ineffective as any other method to do so—and this is the most crucial fact when discussing the role of the Horcruxes within the context of alchemic themes of the *Harry*

Potter series. After all, it's not how powerful the Horcruxes are (because they certainly are powerful) but how *impermanent* they are. They might seem to be the best way for someone to go about becoming immortal, but in the end, they're just a temporary solution to an unsolvable problem—like an extra-sticky Band-Aid that effectively covers a deep cut at first but eventually peels off after being dipped underwater or picked at one too many times. Remarkably, though, Voldemort never quite grasps the impossibility of immortality or truly comprehends the issues with his plan—not while he's alive, and not even while the deformed, shrunken representation of what's left of his soul moans and withers away in the second-to-last chapter of *The Deathly Hallows*. As Dumbledore tells the sympathetic Harry, “You cannot help”—reaffirming the inevitable doom that befalls those like Voldemort who seek out ways to live forever (707).

Although he's arguably the most prominent example, Voldemort isn't the only character in the *Harry Potter* series to try to exploit death-defying items. And while it is the most explicitly “alchemic” (as opposed to “magical”) item in the story, the Philosopher's Stone isn't the only *stone* that Rowling's characters use in alchemic fashion. As part of a wizarding children's story called “The Tale of the Three Brothers” that's featured in *The Deathly Hallows*, the Resurrection Stone is introduced as one of three objects that the titular Peverell brothers earn from a personified Death after using magic to cross a typically-impassable river. The other two objects—the Elder Wand and the Cloak of Invisibility—are given to the first and third brothers respectively, but the Resurrection Stone is given to the second brother, who is described as “an arrogant man” and tells Death that, as his prize, “he want[s] to humiliate Death still further, and ask[s] for the power to recall others from Death” (407). The Resurrection Stone is designed to do just that: to bring the deceased back into the world of the living. However, through Death's malicious loophole, those who are resurrected don't come back to life *exactly* as the second brother had hoped; rather, they appear as pitiful, ghostly versions of their former selves—as is the case with the second brother's fiancé, who “was sad and cold, separated from him as by a veil. Though she had returned to the mortal world, she did not truly belong there” (409). Consequently, not being able to bear seeing his fiancé suffer like that, the second brother's sadness and self-loathing drives him to suicide, thus giving his soul back to Death as should've happened at the river.

Indeed, judging by the example of the second brother's fate, it's a fruitless endeavor to try to reunite with dead loved ones by taking them back from the grave, but that knowledge doesn't stop other people in the series from seeking out the Resurrection Stone's power in heated moments of desperation and longing. Most shockingly, even Albus Dumbledore—the wise, level-headed, and beloved headmaster of Hogwarts—eventually admits to Harry at the end of *The Deathly Hallows* that he once shamefully let himself be tempted by the allure of the Resurrection Stone (then one of Voldemort's Horcruxes made into a ring), hoping to use it to bring back his deceased family members. He especially wants to reconnect with his little sister Ariana, whom he may have killed decades prior in a freak crossfire accident. As he laments to Harry in the King's Cross Station, "I picked [the ring] up, and I put it on, and for a second I imagined that I was about to see Ariana, and my mother, and my father, and to tell them how very, very sorry I was" (719-720). Essentially, Dumbledore wanted the Resurrection Stone to heal old wounds, and for his part, Harry finds no fault with that, exclaiming "It was natural! You wanted to see them again" as if Dumbledore's explanation is a perfectly reasonable excuse (720). After all, Harry empathizes with this temptation, having given into it himself just one chapter beforehand, when he calls on the spirits of his parents as well as Sirius Black and Remus Lupin—the latter both family friends—to comfort him as he makes his way to Voldemort to be killed. However, what sets Harry's desire to defy death apart from Dumbledore's—and indeed, from Voldemort's and the second Peverell brother's, too—is the fact that he *means* all along to eventually give himself over to death without a fight. He never tries to make himself immortal out of a fear of dying, and he isn't hoping to use resurrection to ease a selfish loneliness. (In fact, once he's seen all he can bear to of his four deceased loved ones, he throws the Stone into the Forbidden Forest so that it can never lead another person astray again.) Instead, he admits in the penultimate chapter of *The Deathly Hallows* that he "meant to let Voldemort kill [him]," to which Dumbledore replies "And that [...] will, I think, have made all the difference" (708). Indeed, as one of its core messages, the *Harry Potter* series emphasizes that the only way to avoid the repercussions of alchemic pursuit and become a *true* "master of death" like Harry is not to prolong and/or revitalize lives that are naturally meant to end but to *accept* death and face it head-on when the time comes.

Part 3: *Fullmetal* Parallels

Switching gears to a lesser-known but still heavily moralistic series, Hiromu Arakawa's 27-volume manga (or Japanese-style graphic novel) *Fullmetal Alchemist* deals with many of the same alchemic themes of immortality, sin, and the permanence of death; it just explores them in a much more explicit way (which isn't surprising given the series' title). The main story revolves around two teenaged brothers: Edward Elric (Ed), the titular, double-amputee elder brother who wears metal "auto-mail" prosthetics and serves as a state alchemist for his country Amestris's military; and Alphonse Elric (Al), the younger brother who exists as a soul attached to a large, humanoid suit of armor and tags along on Ed's missions. At the start of the first volume, it's revealed that the two brothers got into their strange bodily predicaments a few years prior, having tried to use "human transmutation"—a taboo alchemic ritual—to revive their recently-deceased and beloved mother, Trisha. Sadly, though, the attempt quite literally blows up in their faces, leaving Ed with no flesh below his left knee and Al with no body at all. What's worse, the ritual turns out to be a failure; all it creates is a moaning, misshapen pile of bones and blood that quickly dies again. Still, being a sort of alchemic prodigy, Ed is able to salvage some minor relief from the situation, sacrificing his right arm as payment so that Al's soul can stay bound in the physical world. Left with nothing but each other and the bitter, hard-hitting realization that—even with alchemy's help—bringing back the dead is truly impossible, Ed and Al decide to leave their rural home and lend their alchemic powers and know-how to the Amestrian military. In doing so, they hope that their involvement will lead them to find something that, up until now, they'd only ever heard of in their absentee alchemist father's leftover research notes: the Philosopher's Stone.

Mostly drawn as a tiny, viscous, pebble-shaped solid but also occasionally appearing as a liquid in a corked test tube, the Philosopher's Stone is an extremely important and widely-desired object in the lore of Arakawa's series, thought to be the solution to otherwise impossible problems. Unlike in Rowling's novels, though, there's not just one Stone in existence, and its power isn't only limited to granting immortality. In response to someone who thinks he and Al want it for further attempts at human transmutation, Ed clarifies in Volume 1 that "The reason we want the stone is to get our

original bodies back,” implying that it has restorative healing powers (66). However, this is hardly the only thing the Stone is good for. After all, to certain power-hungry fighters, possessing the Stone is a way to strengthen attacks so that they can more effectively wipe out their enemies. To Lin Yao and May Chang (a respective prince and foreign alchemist from the Xing country), it’s a gateway into the good graces of their dying emperor, who plans to make an heir out of the first person who can bring him a way to cheat death. To the seven immortal Homunculi (who will be explored in more detail later), it’s a precious life force that also grants them rejuvenation and nearly flawless invincibility. Still, regardless of what it’s used *for*, the catch to using the Stone at all—similar to the catch to using the Horcruxes—is that it’s made from the mass murder of human lives. Just as is the case with Voldemort, some of Arakawa’s characters—like the sadistically murderous Amestrian soldier Solf J. Kimblee as well as all the Homunculi—have no issues with the Stone’s origins and never hesitate to take advantage of its powers. However, to the well-meaning Ed and Al, this fact is an immediate deal-breaker. (Incidentally, though, in two separate life-or-death situations much later in the series, Ed and Al are each forced to make use of a readily-available Stone in order to survive, but neither brother ever ends up using one to get his body back as originally planned.) Still, during their childhood and then at the start of their journey, this horrifying truth isn’t something that the Elric brothers are aware of. It’s only during Volume 3 after meeting up with Tim Marcoh—the Amestrian doctor forcibly hired to make Stones out of war prisoners—that the brothers learn how the Stone is created, after which point they’re loath to use it for their own goals. Playing on the fact that he can’t regain his old body without compromising his morals, Ed cynically remarks “I guess God really does have it in for us sinners,” showing that, despite his good intentions, he’s just as vulnerable as anyone else—real or fictional—to the promises of the Stone (470).

Although Ed considers himself and his past actions to be sinful, there are other ill-meaning characters in the series, however, who do far worse things with alchemy. In particular, the main antagonists of the series—the aforementioned Homunculi—exist with Philosopher’s Stones at their physical core but only use them for truly evil purposes, killing off as many Amestrians as possible so that these people’s souls can be harnessed in a mass-scale transmutation of the entire country. Created by a humanoid being called Father, the Homunculi are each named after Christianity’s seven deadly sins—

Lust, Gluttony, Envy, Greed, Wrath, Sloth, and Pride—and each have an appearance and personality tailored to fit that name. For instance, Lust is a busty seductress who spears her victims with her razor-sharp fingernails; Gluttony is a short, obese man who tries to eat anything—and anyone—in sight; and Envy is an androgynous, shape-shifting murderer who revels in turning people against each other. Still, intimidating though the beings sound, the Homunculi’s supposed invincibility is just as exploitable as the Horcruxes’s, as the Elric brothers and their allies eventually defeat each of the Homunculi throughout the series in the same sort of race-against-the-clock way that Harry and his friends go after Voldemort’s soul-infused treasures.

More importantly, as each of the Homunculi is an extension of the so-called Father’s soul, he has supposedly expelled each of these sins from his own being with the creation of each Homunculus. When questioned in Volume 24 about why he wants to be rid of these innate human flaws, Father responds by saying “I do not wish to be human. I will become a perfect being” (414). Interestingly, this logic is horribly similar to Voldemort’s desire to rise above mortality through the creation of his seven Horcruxes. Although they go about it in different ways, both antagonists use alchemic techniques to split their soul into seven distinct and accursed pieces, hoping to erase traces of their humanity.

With regards to the protagonists of *Fullmetal Alchemist*, though, their biggest similarity to those in *Harry Potter* lies in a blatant desire to bring back dead loved ones—especially parents, as evidenced through Harry’s visions of James and Lilly Potter in the Mirror of Erised in *Sorcerer’s Stone* and Ed and Al’s sharp pangs for their mother throughout the entire series. Still, *attempting* to revive the dead is just as sinful a practice to the Amestrians as the Horcruxes are to the wizarding world. In fact, in speaking of Ed and Al in Volume 1, a minor character accusingly shouts “Those two dared to do the one thing forbidden to alchemists [...] the unspeakable crime of human transmutation!” (59). As mentioned earlier, this crime involves toying with nature to try to revive someone but only coming up with a half-dead, non-human mess of flesh—which, interestingly, is very similar to how those affected by the Resurrection Stone in *Harry Potter* come back as sad, ethereal versions of their former selves. Indeed, both series emphasize the fact that neither magic nor alchemy is enough to overcome death, and so people should stop making attempts to do so. For the Elric brothers’ part, because they were

so traumatized by what happened to Trisha, they have learned the pointlessness and repercussions of human transmutation and can't ever be tempted to do it again.

Still, they aren't the only characters in *Fullmetal Alchemist* to learn about the impossibility of resurrection the hard way. A housewife-slash-alchemy-expert named Izumi Curtis and a military colonel named Roy Mustang are two additional protagonists who get drawn in by the lure of human transmutation—even knowing full-well that there are dangers involved with such a taboo ritual. Izumi is so desperate for a child after a miscarriage that she tries to use human transmutation to revive her unborn baby—a process that ruins her internal organs and causes her to vomit blood regularly. Additionally, when Roy sees his cherished friend and lieutenant Riza Hawkeye get her throat slashed by a crony of the Homunculi, he's painfully tempted to use human transmutation to save her life, ultimately being forced into it at the cost of his eyesight. Interestingly, though, as with the Elric brothers' case, none of these bodily side-effects are random. In fact, Father gloats in Volume 25 that “For every human who dares challenge the natural order, a fitting punishment is meted out to put them in their place,” which explains the codependent Elric brothers' cold, metallic bodies, the motherly Izumi's infertility, and the ambitious visionary Roy's blindness (125).

After all, extremely harsh though it is, this karma is a hallmark of the series' alchemic lore, acting as an example of the following principle explained by Ed in Volume 1: “The basis of alchemy is the ‘equivalent exchange!’ That means that to obtain something, something of equal value must be lost” (26). Indeed, this metaphor is the foundation of the entire story; it's the logic behind many of the main characters' actions, especially the attempted human transmutation of Trisha, when Ed ruefully laments to Al that “All I could get for one arm was your soul” (64). (Interestingly, in the *Harry Potter* series, Dumbledore makes an eerily similar remark to Harry in *Half-Blood Prince* when, in relating how his hand has been ruined from wearing the ring-turned-Horcrux, “a withered hand does not seem an unreasonable exchange for a seventh of Voldemort's soul” [503]).

Accordingly, then, getting Al's *entire* body back—not just his soul—should naturally come at a very high price, and it does. In the final volume of the series, after Al offers up his soul

to get Ed his flesh-and-blood right arm back, Ed ends up sacrificing his ability to use alchemy

to pull Al's withered human form back into the physical world. However, he's not upset about losing this power. Smiling knowingly, he says "Even without alchemy I'll still have all my friends," to which a being called Truth—the personification of alchemic karma—proudly responds "That's the correct answer, alchemist" (520). This moment echoes Harry's abstract moment of revelation with Dumbledore in King's Cross; here too, an otherworldly being praises the main character for figuring out the best way to deal with death. Indeed, just as Harry discards the Resurrection Stone and then returns the Elder Wand to Dumbledore's grave so that neither item can ever corrupt another person, Ed also becomes a sort of "master of death" when he relinquishes his alchemic powers for the good of someone else, finally realizing that the answer isn't to *defy* death but to *welcome* it with open arms—even if one of those arms used to be made of metal.

Conclusion

Given all the above examples, it's clear that the two very different series—one about wizardry and the power of love, the other about alchemic forces and brotherly bonds—have much more in common than it initially seems, and this link mainly comes from the ways in which alchemy is featured throughout each of their stories. For instance, both series feature the Philosopher's Stone—a real-world legend—and take certain pieces of this legend as inspiration for the Stone's role in their own plots. Additionally, both series' main antagonists—Lord Voldemort and Father—use dark forces to create seven supposedly indestructible objects and beings that are all eventually destroyed. What's more, just like with the second Peverell brother and Dumbledore's use of the Resurrection Stone, *Fullmetal Alchemist* offers instances of protagonists letting love tempt them into death-defying sin: Ed and Al want reunite with their mother; Izumi Curtis wants to raise her unborn child; Roy Mustang wants to save his lieutenant. Oddly, though, none of these instances should be considered examples of particularly evil desires, and yet all six of these characters are still severely punished for such, losing parts of their bodies (as in the case with those who use human transmutation) and even their lives (as in the case with the second Peverell brother). Finally, the two main protagonists of the series—*Harry Potter* and Edward Elric—are two selfless yet flawed characters who ultimately achieve their goals through learning to

accept death instead of trying to overcome it.

Overall, then, what all these overlaps suggest about alchemy's use in fantasy is that it *isn't* a perfect, miraculous way to overcome death, like people from centuries ago once thought. Instead, it's an outlet through which characters learn that death *can't* be overcome under any circumstances—not even through methods as mighty as the Horcruxes or human transmutation. Still, as depressing and anticlimactic as it may seem, this ultimate takeaway from both stories isn't at all meant to be a hopeless reminder that death is an inevitable and unforgiving force. Instead, it's meant to reassure readers that death is simply a part of life and isn't nearly as scary or horrible as people tend to make it out to be. After all, as Dumbledore wisely remarks in one of his most famous lines from *Sorcerer's Stone*: “to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure” (297).

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