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## **A Comparative Study of Voldemort and Snape in the *Harry Potter* Series: A Psychoanalytic Perspective**

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### **Abstract:**

*The Harry Potter* series has gained huge popularity in both the novels and films. Lord Voldemort, the antagonist, is portrayed as one of the scariest villains who could not even be named by people, and Severus Snape is someone who is incontrovertibly accepted as the most confusing yet interesting character of all, who receives special attention and space not only in the mind of the protagonist but also in the readers. This research work comparatively examines these two characters in the light of psychoanalytic theories. The study has been conducted through finding out similarities and dissimilarities between them. By examining their actions and their entire life history through psychoanalytic lenses, I will throw light on how their early life experiences have influenced in shaping their adult personality and behaviour.

**Keywords:** *The Harry Potter* series, Voldemort, Snape, theme of good and evil, meaning, purpose and role of responsibility in life, Psychopathy, Psychoanalysis.

### **Introduction**

*The Harry Potter* series, even after twelve times rejection by the publishers, has produced enormous zeal and enthusiasm across the whole world unlike any other work in modern times, which has been translated into more than eighty-five languages, selling over six hundred million copies. The fictive world has attracted children as well as adults equally. Through dark themes and ghastly characters, the series compels the reader to undertake a journey of exploration of the deepest parts of the human psyche through multiple fields of visions encompassing from culture, and religion to psychology. Thereby, the *Harry Potter* series has succeeded to make its place as a topic of discussion and interpretation in the universities, conferences and academic articles, exceeding from its confinement of identifying itself as fantasy literature for children.

In the story, like every other literature of its type, the *Harry Potter* has evil people far stronger and dangerous than the good. Harry fights against the most evil wizards of hundreds of years and wins. Furthermore, there is this idea of self-sacrifice of the protagonist in the attempt to destroy the evil. This is not only true for Harry but for Snape also, which is often ignored. Therefore, this is not only an adventure story of a Harry or Snape but of the human race. There have been many studies conducted to illustrate this theme of good and evil in *Harry Potter*, but what lacks is an insight into the birth and growth of evil and ultimately overcoming it while others fail, which goes parallel with the character development of Snape and Lord Voldemort. Besides, the primary theme of the series being the struggle between good and evil, the thematic concern of evil needs proper understanding and appreciation in the pursuit of nourishment and enculturation of human society, which is one of the noble purposes of literature. To fully comprehend the two characters, it is essential to conduct a psychoanalytic study since it is impossible to know a person on the basis of his deeds alone. Therefore, psychoanalytic theories have been applied in order to unravel the characters' selves and innermost parts of which perhaps they themselves are not aware. As Carl Jung says while discussing his prediction on World Wars:

...we need more psychology, we need more understanding of human nature because the only real danger that exists is man himself. He is the great danger, and we are pitifully unaware of it. We know nothing of man. Far too little. His psyche should be studied because we are the origin of all coming evil. (Jung)

Since research is an exploration of new knowledge and consciousness, it is important to be cynical and unlearn the conventional in the pursuit of new knowledge and new realities. Be it physical or intellectual, an exploration is ultimately crossing boundaries, here which is to dispense with the act of mere generalization of 'evil' and expand beliefs and understanding for the course of action in due situation. Now, evil becomes an immensely problematic term to define, especially when it comes to the question of a postmodern text in a postmodern time (when nothing is fixed as the truth). People hold varied opinions and beliefs. The succeeding research is not intended to ignite any conundrum on good and evil as such, rather it goes on to observe the characters in the light of moralities or conscious actions that are considered as bad or good in the present times, and also considers looking at existing profound problems. Taking everything into account, it will be easier to analyze it through actions and attributes that are

associated with evil and that damage the society, such as wantonness, anger, racial hatred, aggression, sadism and homicide. Yet, the division of good and evil is sometimes blurred in this thesis in order to introduce new outlooks and interpretations.

Therefore, this is going to be qualitative research where the study will be conducted through observing similarities and dissimilarities between the two aforementioned characters. Their startling similarities ask the reader to ruminate on Rowling's hidden message and cultural takeaway of the texts. The research questions addressed in the work are- firstly, how or to what degree do the early life experiences shape the adult personality and behaviour? Have their childhood experiences made them 'evil', or have they chosen to be so the way they are? Secondly, Voldemort and Snape have tremendous similarities in their mindsets. Then how does one who put his endeavours to save Voldemort's life choose to jeopardize one's own life to destroy him at the end? What deeper parts are at play here? Thirdly, what is the interrelation between Voldemort and Snape?

### **The Comparison between Lord Voldemort and Severus Snape**

In comparative study sometimes the two or more characters are explicitly alike, while in certain cases their similarities are not transparent. In the case of Snape and Voldemort it is not clearly visible. Therefore, it requires an in-depth research and psychological insights to comprehend these two characters and acquire the message implicitly offered by JK Rowling. The study has been conducted through dissecting their similarities and dissimilarities, unmasking who they internally are and the facade they demonstrate throughout the series.

A. Similarities between Voldemort and Snape: The similarity between these two characters occupies the basis of the argument of the thesis. It is the progression of thought.

Firstly, both Snape and Voldemort had experienced a troubled childhood. Snape's parents were always into conflict and his father was rude and abusive towards him. Children who grow up with households having conflicts and issues tend to have poor communication and interpersonal skills (DU Rocher Schudlich et al.). Snape faced difficulties to befriend other children both in Hogwarts and before attending Hogwarts. Besides, poverty largely impacted his childhood negatively. According to Morag Treanor, "Poverty has multiple negative impacts

on children's outcome leading to inequalities of health, cognitive development, psychological development and educational attainment" (1). In his teaching career also Snape never makes a proper social life and sound emotional health. He is always agitated and harsh (Nane). Like Snape, Tom has never been able to build a healthy attachment with his parents. His mother died after giving birth, and his father abandoned them. He did not receive an adequate care and attention, and also failed to make any attachment with any caregiver. Such kind of neglect falls under the category of maltreatment (Anderson). According to Cicchetti and Toth, "maltreated children exhibit less empathy, fewer prosocial and more aggressive behaviours and higher rates of delinquency than their non-maltreated peers" (421). Besides, Tom did not find anyone who was like him, a wizard. He always despised returning to that place which Harry also called "a grim place (the orphanage)" for a child. " 'No', said (Tom) Riddle at once. 'I'd much rather stay at Hogwarts than go back to that – to that-...'" (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* 208)

Secondly, Snape was very lonely from his childhood to his demise. He had only one friend in his childhood – Lily whom he lost soon. During Hogwarts years, he used to engage himself with studies and remained self-contained. He is not a social person even when he joins Hogwarts as a teacher. There is nobody in his life to whom he could talk. He leads a solitary life. In the case of Tom, he too is reserved. He also fails to build any amicable relationship with anyone in his life. He only creates his group of friends to dominate and accomplish his mission. The Death Eaters call him "my lord", and he commands tasks to them.

Thirdly, Snape and Voldemort both detest their childhood residence and find Hogwarts their home. Snape chooses to spend the rest of his life in Hogwarts and joins as a teacher. As quoted earlier, Tom too felt Hogwarts was his proper place and never wanted to return to the orphanage. Later, Tom also appeals to be a teacher in Hogwarts but he is rejected. As Harry also thinks, "Hogwarts was the first and best home he had known. He and Voldemort and Snape, the abandoned boys, had all found home here..." (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* 697)

Fourthly, Snape and Voldemort both were selected for Slytherin, and both have been highly skilful and exceptionally powerful wizards from childhood. According to Sirius, when Severus was a first-year student, he had the knowledge of more spells and curses than any seventh-year student. He also had the rare ability to discover new spells. Besides, he knew Legilimency and

Occlumency. He added major improvements to his Potion textbook when he was a student. In the case of Tom, he was an heir of the great Salazar Slytherin. Besides, throughout the series, Voldemort is an extremely powerful and brilliant wizard who is mastered at spell creation and transfiguration. He is highly proficient at dueling, and he can even perform magic without any wand.

Fifthly, Snape and Voldemort both harbour contempt for muggles. Both of their fathers were muggle and were unkind and irresponsible towards their children. A child can not be expected to judge objectively any person without any bias, especially when it comes to the question of their close relation like father and arrive at a conclusion that all muggles are not the same. This happens with Snape, too. From an early age, he received violence and abuse from his muggle father who hated magic. He also received abuse and confrontation from Petunia, a muggle. The muggles he encountered hated magic – a practice that was intimately connected to what Snape was – a wizard. It was only in Hogwarts especially in Slytherin where Snape had been accepted as he was, i.e. having a fascination for Dark Arts. Snape's hidden contempt for muggles is evident in two cases: when he called Lily 'mud blood' in the rage of the moment which is known in psychology as 'slip of tongue', and when he joined in the Death Eaters group in school whose major purpose was to purify Hogwarts from muggle-borns. While in the case of Snape the contempt is latent, in the case of Tom it is self-proclaimed. He, too, detested his muggle father for abandoning him and his mother to the extent that he murdered his father and grandparents. He ruthlessly killed muggle-borns and made this his mission. So, it can be said that both of them carried a bit of self-loathing. It was until Snape had come into agreement with Dumbledore after which he overcame the evil feeling.

Sixthly, Snape and Voldemort both are psychologically demented. The case of Snape is already discussed how Snape lacked interpersonal and intrapersonal skills due to his troublesome circumstances and experiences. Besides, Snape used to be continuously bullied by James and his friends. People who were bullied tend to become angry, and abusive, and engage in criminal behavior (Rivara and Menestrel). Possibly, this is why Snape often engages in bullying his students and joined the Death Eaters when he was a student. Moreover, Snape was so obsessed with his love for Lily and hatred for James that he did not care if James and Harry died. He was not concerned with Lily's happiness, his happiness lay only in keeping her safe.

According to Beth Sissons and Zawn Villines, people who are reared by abusive parents can develop abnormal attachment patterns. Snape was suffering from Obsessive Love Disorder(2019). Additionally, childhood traumas influenced Snape's life to such a large extent that he failed to move on in his life. Tom too was going through psychological adversity. Early loss of parents, friendlessness, and neglect caused Tom to develop malevolent means to cope with the adversity. He expressed himself only through rage and sadism and never learned the ability to make healthy relationships. He used to frighten and hurt other people since his childhood. According to Dr. Suzanne Degges-White, qualities like aggression, and inability to feel empathy or remorse prove that the person is suffering from Sadistic Personality Disorder, and Tom had it all since his childhood. Tom also exhibits traits of fanaticism about his ancestry and obsession with pure blood sternly throughout his entire life. Furthermore, it can be argued that Tom had been suffering from thanatophobia or fear of death from his childhood. This particular disorder generally develops during the childhood of a person.

There is nothing to be feared from a body, Harry, any more than there is anything to be feared from the darkness. Lord Voldemort, who of course secretly fears both, disagrees. But once again he reveals his own lack of wisdom. It is the unknown we fear when we look upon death and darkness, nothing more. (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* 566)

His anxiety about death compelled him to create Horcruxes and become immortal.

Seventhly, Both Snape and Voldemort applied for the post of Defense and the Dark Arts, and both were rejected by the ministry.

B. Dissimilarities between Voldemort and Snape: The dissimilarity between these two characters comprises as well as marks the distinct qualities of their personality.

Firstly, there is no doubt that earlier Snape was truly evil. He was a loyal follower of Voldemort who was always cautious if there was any danger for his master, but after Lily's death Dumbledore asked him to protect Lily's son and he then changed his path from evil to virtue. He genuinely fights for the good side even after his motivation for Lily is removed. This is evident in the way he prevents Phineas Nigellus from using the word 'Mudblood'. Moreover, when Dumbledore asks him: " '...How many men and women have you watched die?' 'Lately, only

those whom I could not save,’ said Snape” (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* 687). In a tweet, Rowling said:

Snape didn’t die for ‘ideals’. He died in an attempt to expiate his own guilt. He could have broken cover at any time to save himself but he chose not to tell Voldemort that the latter was making a fatal error in targeting Harry. Snape’s silence ensured Harry’s victory. (Rowling, 2015)

In the case of Voldemort, virtue is far away. Instead of feeling guilty for his actions, he takes pride in his crimes. He remains unchanged throughout his entire life.

Secondly, Snape may be psychologically obsessive towards Lily, but his love for her is completely genuine. He loved Lily even after her marriage with James and keeps loving her after her death. Snape leads an unmarried life longing none but Lily.

“ ‘After all this time ?’ ‘Always’ said Snape.” (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* 687) In the case of Tom, he never feels any love or affection towards anyone. There is no feeling of endearment in him. He only utilizes people for his personal benefit.

Thirdly, Snape is not completely controlled by his id. He does not act upon his instincts for the good. He had an inclination towards dark arts from his childhood, but he chooses not to follow it. Besides, although he has intense hatred for Harry as he reminds him of James, he protects Harry jeopardizing his own life for the sake of his noble mission. He bullies Harry only to gratify his urge. Therefore, it can be said that his ego is predominantly maintained by the superego. On the contrary, Tom is someone who has no control over his id. He can kill and concoct innocent people to attain his greed, as this is evident in the case of Hepzibah Smith. Besides, he does not even hesitate for a moment to kill apparently the most useful of all followers – Snape. He is overwhelmed by his id to attain what he wants at the cost of everything, as this is evident in the entire series.

Fourthly, In 2008, Rowling mentioned whether Snape can be considered a hero:

Yes, I do; though a very flawed hero. An anti-hero, perhaps. He is not a particularly likeable man in many ways. He remains rather cruel, a bully, riddled with bitterness and insecurity – and yet he

loved, and showed loyalty to that love and, ultimately, laid down his life because of it. That's pretty heroic! (Appelbaum, 2008)

Therefore, he is not a typical hero. Rather, he can be more specifically classified as a Byronic hero. Critic Lord Macaulay describes the Byronic hero as “a man proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his kind and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection” (Christiansen). The Byronic hero is characterized as brave and intelligent. He lives in self-exile who are haunted by their past. All these are true for Snape. He is a tormented melancholic figure who is in eternal loss and has become cold with time. On the other hand, Tom is a ruthless psychopath who cherishes evil purposes and perverted meaning of life.

Fifthly, all throughout his life, Tom wants power and domination over others people. He strives for superiority and ensures it even if it required war. On the other hand, Snape only desires Lily, even after her rejection and death.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, what to draw from the whole discussion may differ for different people. The research is actively concentrated on the evil to a greater extent. The true devil, Lord Voldemort, attains contempt from the reader. Maybe he deserves some sympathy with it also. After all, what else can be expected from a psychologically demented young boy who is left with his immense powers and agonies. Besides, manipulation, cruelty and immorality are something that he learned from his first teachers – his parents. He is and always been a lonely person who expresses his vexations on others to gratify his impulses, and never knows the experience of love and mercy. As Rowling herself has already described Voldemort as a psychopath (a person having characteristics like manipulation, lack of empathy, lack of remorse or guilt, superficial charm, antisocial behaviour, narcissism, cold and unemotional, and no conscience) so is evident in the analysis. It is important to note that other than some biological causes, reasons which cause anyone to be a psychopath according to Amy Morin, a psychotherapist and international bestselling author, are-

Early research on psychopathy suggested that it often stems from issues related to parent-child attachment. Emotional deprivation, parental rejection, and a lack of affection were all thought to increase the risk that a child would become a psychopath.

Studies have found a link between maltreatment, abuse, insecure attachments, and frequent separations from caregivers. Some researchers believe that these childhood issues can trigger psychopathic traits. (Morin)

These are all true for Voldemort, but according to Professor Essi Viding, "It is clear that intervening early in children with callous-unemotional traits could prevent psychopathy in adulthood, with all the psychological and social consequences." (Why Do Some People Become Psychopaths? | Royal Society) The word "psychopath" literally means "suffering soul" (Seabrook). So the person himself suffers miserably, which is often overlooked for their actions.

Then, what is needed while taking necessary actions in these cases, according to Dr Willem H J

Martens in his famous article, is to rethink the idea of 'psychopath',

The current picture of the psychopath is incomplete because emotional suffering and loneliness are ignored. When these aspects are considered, our conception of the psychopath goes beyond the heartless and becomes more human. (Martens)

In the case of Snape, he too fails as a person. Even after turning to good side, he fails as a teacher to the students. He is cold and rude towards his students and bullies his students relentlessly, including those who clearly struggle such as Neville. His acting always rude and resentful towards Harry solely because he reminds him of his father James reveals his immaturity. Not only that, he despises him for his fame and was jealous of him for being the chosen one. "Tut, tut – fame clearly isn't everything." (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* 72) In Snape's student life, Snape used to be bullied by James and his friends who were from Gryffindor. It was the Slytherins who showed generosity towards him. So the only students he likes were the Slytherins, and he shows them some gross favouritism. As a teacher, these are the worst acts in which one can engage. The school should have been cautious about the behaviour and actions of the teachers in this case. Then again, he is the one who jeopardizes his own life for the sake of the school and the students. All these clearly demonstrate how profound childhood experiences can root into a person. Even after changing his path he fails to recover and eliminate certain deeper parts of himself. Still, there are many attributes which are widely appreciated in Snape. As a matter of fact, Harry names one of his sons after him, and that says a great deal about Snape's character. Apart from that, Snape has

been voted to be the most "favourite" character of the Harry Potter film series (Pauli). Thus, Snape wins in terms of both in the ultimate destruction of Voldemort and the hearts of millions.

Not only that, Snape's story presents Rowling's altruistic vision blended with responsibility. The account of Snape teaches to develop noble visions for the good of the individual as well as the society, which today's society lacks in the pursuit of materialism. Snape was living as a mere servant of a tyrant. After Lily had died, he wanted to take his own life, but when Dumbledore consoled him, he took full responsibility of Harry, and gradually he began to grow a personal liability for other people's lives too, as evident in one of the previously mentioned quotations – "...How many men and women have you watched die?"

'Lately, only those whom I could not save,' said Snape" (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* 687). Both altruism and responsibility have profound goodness in an individual's life. As Steve Rose, a counsellor, says, "Responsibility is important because it provides a sense of purpose, in addition to building resilience amidst adversity on an individual and societal level."

("Why Responsibility Is so Important") As for altruism or self-sacrifice particularly, Paul T. P. Wong, a clinical psychologist, writes in his article,

...When I prepared for a talk on Chinese positive psychology in Hong Kong, I could not help but think about the spirit of self-sacrifice prevalent in traditional Chinese families. Chinese positive psychology is collectivistic and paradoxical. The good life is defined by what is good for the family, for the group, rather than just for the self. It is through self-sacrifice for the larger good that one experiences true joy and fulfillment. ("The Positive Psychology of Self-Sacrifice & International Network on Personal Meaning").

In the final analysis, it can be argued that the character of Voldemort is, therefore, flat whereas the character of Snape is round. Through this analysis it is also evident that childhood experiences actively determine adult personality which sometimes exceeds beyond someone's control. The story also shows how humanelly experiences, such as love possesses the potential to turn someone from evil path. Moreover, Rowling implicitly conveys the message how schools should be like through depicting how schools should not be like. School's failure to

assess every student plays a significant part if it is undone, it can actually lead to unimaginable destruction such as this. Hogwarts never really wanted to acquaint with each and every student at a personal level. The school should also be concerned with the highly potential students on how they make them exercise their talent and skills for the good of humanity while lessening the possibility of empowering the evil sides (everyone has evil temptations) of them as well. Moreover, Rowling's work is a secular postmodern text where the characters can be said to be judged and praised according to how they maintain their instincts. Therefore, everything is highly morality oriented. Both Snape and Tom are vengeful, Snape towards Harry and Tom towards muggles. It is the actions one takes despite of what lurks inside him, which is the manifestation of his virtue appreciated by the humanity. It is this which gives man the meaning of life worthy of living, unlike Tom who finds himself lost in the maze of life possessing none of such quality and is living in hell. This is why he fails to attain sympathy from the reader. It is only Harry who understands this, and that is why he says that Voldemort is the weak one who would never know love or friendship, therefore Harry feels sorry for him.

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