

# Harry's True Mentor and His Moral Struggle in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter Series*

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Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:8 August 2013

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Courtesy: <http://www.harleysvillebooks.com/celebrate-all-things-harry-potter>

## Silent Language

Spoken words always carry significant meaning, but sometimes unspoken silence becomes more meaningful and powerful. Implicit suggestions hold nuances of meaning in literature. Flat, static characters are always explicit and there is no mystery in them to be fathomed. Complex characters, on the other hand, are unpredictable and thereby become more interesting and challenging. Severus Snape, in Harry Potter series definitely falls under the latter category. He, in the author's own words, is "a gift of a character"

([http://web.archive.org/web/20110726135809/http://www.half-bloodprince.org/snape\\_jkr.php](http://web.archive.org/web/20110726135809/http://www.half-bloodprince.org/snape_jkr.php)).

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## **A Complex Multifaceted Teacher**

The Potions Instructor, Head of the Slytherin House is arguably the most complex and multifaceted teacher at Hogwarts. He is clever and cunning; intelligent and has a keen analytical mind. The progress of the series shows him as a more layered character evolving from a malicious and prejudiced teacher to one of considerable complexity and moral ambiguity. The immediate impression on beholding him is of fear and scorn. With the combination of his robes, his attitude, behavior and his classroom décor, he employs pedagogy of fear and intimidation. The first year apprentice wizards, no wonder see him as a nasty and suspicious teacher.

## **Snape – with Sallow Skin, Hooked Nose**

Snape is shown as a man with “sallow skin, a hooked nose and greasy, shoulder-length black hair” (*Chamber of Secrets* 78). This unpleasant appearance definitely augurs his unpleasant attitude towards the students, whose ability he always undermines. So fear is the ruling wand in his classroom, and he has the ultimate control. He speaks in barely more than a whisper and he “had the gift of keeping a class silent without effort” (*Chamber of Secrets* 137) as Minerva McGonagall exclaims.

## **Not Well-Liked**

Rowling sketches the details of his persona thus: “his eyes were like black Hagrid, but with none of Hagrid’s warmth. They were cold and empty and empty and made you think of dark tunnels” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 136). Ruling his class with a rod of iron, and a look of contempt, Snape is not well-liked by the apprentice wizards of all houses probably except Slytherin. Just moments after the sorting ceremony gets over, Harry, with a pain in his thunderbolt scar, feels the piercing, scornful look of the professor, who at the very outset strikes a note of bitterness and enmity towards the young wizard. In every encounter, Snape displays unconcealed hatred for the poor boy from Privet Drive. Harry is cornered by baffling questions, that are entirely new to him as he is to the school of Wizardry. His complete ignorance in stating it frankly gets him detention and grabs some points away from his house Gryffindor. About Harry, he makes an open statement in *Goblet of Fire*:

You might be laboring under the delusion that the entire wizarding world is impressed with you.... To me, Potter, you are nothing but a nasty little boy who considers rules beneath him (516).

### **With Malice**

Snape is an oily, petty, nasty, vindictive man not with a heart of gold but of pure malice. To Harry particularly, he is a sinister and malicious teacher making frequent disparaging, snide remarks. He persistently mocks Harry and his dead father:

How extraordinary like your father you are. Potter...he too was exceedingly arrogant. A small amount of talent on the Quidditch field made him think that he was a cut above the rest of us too.... The resemblance is uncanny (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 284).

Snape cruelly insults Hermione and her intellect, constantly berates Neville Longbottom. He indeed swoops around like “an overgrown bat”, with the dark looks of a gothic villain (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 288). All these conventional narrative cues indicate that Snape is a villain of the worst kind. Suspicions of attempted murder, trickery and larceny follow him, but he remains unaffected by the students’ ire.

### **Unexpected Helpful Manner**

But what is intriguing about Snape is his intention. Megin L. Birch in her essay, ‘Schooling Harry Potter’, argues that there are moments when Snape acts in unexpected helpful manner towards Harry, which raise the question whether he is really bad as he is seen to be or not. Snape continues to be a figure of questionable morality and Rowling effectively employs narrative misdirection that makes us privy to Harry’s visceral suspicions. Harry continues to misread Snape’s actions despite being proven wrong time and again, in spite of the fact that Snape has defended and protected Harry on several occasions.

### **Question in the Readers’ Minds – Will Snape Betray?**

Rowling makes the readers waver between believing Snape was loyal to Dumbledore or maybe to Voldemort, believing him to be good or to be evil. The fact that he is faithful to Dumbledore challenges us to explore why and how he came to be evil and vindictive.

Throughout each school year, the professors and students alike feel bewildered at Dumbledore's persistent faith in Snape. Harry especially, waited until the moment Snape would betray Dumbledore and thought he had discovered the truth on the astronomy tower, but like everyone else he was mistaken. There were deeper purposes beneath the art of Dumbledore's death at the hands of Snape: a kindness, a respect for friendship, and an act of heroism. Among the three Pals, it is Hermione who argues for Snape's innocence. Though she admits that he is not very nice, she trusts Dumbledore's faith in Snape and knows the latter wouldn't betray him. She calls on Dumbledore's authority to bolster her reading about Snape. "so why shouldn't he be right about Snape even if Snape is a bit\_ ' \_evil" (*Goblet of Fire* 480).

### **Tense Relationship**

Harry retains feelings of suspicion and resentment towards Snape, and their relationship remains tense. Snape's behaviour and attitude towards Harry also remains unchanged. When Harry overhears Snape and Quirrell in the forbidden Forest, he readily assumes that Snape is on the side of evil. Harry misreads the situation because of his personal animosity and their mutual hatred. The reality is just the contrary, just the reversal of judgement. It is not Snape who aids the Dark Lord Voldemort in plundering the Sorcerer's Stone but the inept Prof. Quirrell, whose laughter becomes "chill and sharp" upon Harry's discovery. He sneers: "So useful to have [Snape] swooping around like an overgrown bat. Next to him, who would suspect p-p-poor, stuttering P-Professor Quirrell?" (*Philosopher's Stone* 288). Snape's suspicious activities had always been a screen for saving Harry's life.

### **Personal History Shapes a Teacher**

Rowling offers bits of Snape's personal history, his heartaches, implying thereby that a teacher's personal biography shapes the kind of teacher he/she would become one day. The episodes from the past show that Snape is a loner, rarely trusted except by the headmaster; he came from a very unhappy home. The power of Snape lies in his symbolic role. It is Snape

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whose inside is not revealed and who remains an enigma forever. Harry's intentions and Lord Voldemort's plots off-stage at each important moment are explained. The factor that remains masked is what Albus and Severus have been doing and thinking. It is this ambiguous and mysterious nature that makes it liable for everyone's suspicion. We get to see the true Snape emerge right before he dies in front of Harry. The man we see in the pensive mood is altogether different from what we have so far seen, we expected him to be, a far cry from the melodramatic, the brooding stereotypical villain. He has seemed to foster nothing but resentment, bitterness, and flat-out meanness, but it turns out that he has been motivated by the highest, best, most valuable qualities all along – love and loyalty. “Nothing is what you think it is, no one is who you think they are, on the surface” (*Unlocking Harry Potter* 155)

### **Tragic, Noble and Self-sacrificing Character**

Once the truth is revealed; that makes him a truly tragic, noble and self-sacrificing character. There are scarcely any blissful memories in his past. The reason he considers Harry with such an embittered mind has a connection to his gloomy student life as a peer to Lily and James Potter. Through a series of jinx and pranks, Snape and James had terrorized each other. Each time he looked at Harry, he was reminded of the humiliation he suffered at the hands of James Potter. Young Snape was insecure and vulnerable.

Given his time over again [Snape] would not have become a Death Eater, but like many insecure, vulnerable people, he craved membership of something big and powerful, something impressive. [...] [He] was so blinded by his attraction to the Dark side he thought [Lily] would find him impressive if he became a real Death Eater

( [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Severus\\_Snape](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Severus_Snape))

### **Love Spurned**

Lily refused Snape's love and married James. Snape felt humiliated, his soul grew bitter and poisoned which led him to seek evil. Yet his devotion to Lily never faded, never tarnished, and after her death, he never forgave himself; he succumbed to the grief and self-loathing that lingered in his heart. The anger he felt toward himself blinds him from showing any warmth or

affection towards Harry, but his love keeps him sane throughout every descent of evil and darkness into his soul. He never abandons the hope of Lily's spirit living on.

### **In Danger Countless Times**

Snape is divided painfully between Dumbledore's world and Voldemort's; he is the one put in danger countless times, always in the shadow of the dark Lord's wrath. He thus walks a treacherous line, tantalized by the darkness, but never faltering from the good intention of redeeming the magical world and the humans too. He plays his cards close to the vest. He is a clever double agent. "As the only character to win the trust of both Dumbledore and Voldemort, both the Order of Phoenix and the Death Eaters, he sculpts the outcome". (Appelbaum 95). Though constantly being an object of suspicion, he keeps an eye on Harry watching and protecting him until making Harry understand that he himself is a Horcrux. Rowling calls Snape "a child conceived outside of love" (Bloomsbury, 2007). His truest motivations were a mixture of remorse and undying love for Lily that motivated him to seek the end of her murderer. It is this love for Lily Potter that is the redeeming factor of Snape's character. It is this love that acts finally as the redeeming spirit of all the scorn he has showered on Harry.

### **Losing a Trusted Friend**

Snape didn't only lose Lily, but also his only trusted friend, who was with him always. In executing Dumbledore, at his own request, he protected Draco Malfoy from destroying his own soul, becoming a killer. He is truly "a bittersweet prince in disguise" (Ashley np) he sacrificed himself so that others could heave a sigh of relief - to see the world where there was no threat of evil; to see the light, though he himself struggled to have a glimpse of it all through his life. It is he who has orchestrated everything to the ultimate unravelling of Voldemort. "Hitler's defeat took an alliance of nations; Voldemort's required a single Snape". (Appelbaum 96).

### **Snape's Role as a Mentor**

What is most crucial about Snape is his role as a mentor. He is above all a teacher and later headmaster after Dumbledore's death. It is he who steers Harry's actual apprenticeship throughout. As it goes by the pedagogy of education, a truly liberating apprenticeship requires a student to disobey his teacher, thereby making his own decisions. Cultivation of self-will and

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self-sacrifice for a greater good, demand the dismissal of the wisdom of the teacher on the part of the apprentice. Snape chooses that he is not like Voldemort, even as there are so many things that seem to show some similarity between both. Because there is a piece of Voldemort within him, as Horcrux, he chooses to die in order to have Harry alive.

### **Underlying Lesson**

The underlying message of pedagogy seems to be, ‘to abdicate one’s free will to the larger whole is the key to individual freedom. The choices the ward makes by disobeying the teacher are indeed the right choices. Whenever Snape tries to keep Potter safe, Harry makes the wrong decisions, which get him into the most serious of dangers, but they turn out to be ‘right’ in solving a mystery. Snape’s actions are at the heart of these pedagogical paradoxes. Snape represents “something” other than prescribed methods based on cause and effect for a ‘good enough’ education. Dumbledore appeared very “good,” but has fought his own personal battle with self-interest and power. He doomed himself risking everything for one last attempt at uniting the Deathly Hallows and personally reaping the benefits. Snape constantly and actively reaffirmed his allegiance with each act of support for those united against Voldemort, against evil. So in the end, it is Snape who turns out to be the self-determined teacher, and Dumbledore, the shallow cad.

### **Teach by Example**

If teachers teach not by method but by example, it is Snape who is the true teacher who has sacrificed his life to enable Harry’s apprenticeship. It is not his clearly superior talent with spells and invention of new ones that make him admirable. But it is his choice to act in the name of love without showing it off. His cruelty and hatred is indeed a mask to hide his fundamental loyalty to Harry and the wizarding world. Each of Snape’s actions, however terrible they may seem originally, are transformed in meaning by the childhood memory, he allows Harry to see after his death. He dies a sacrificial death so that his student can be transformed by the relationship that this action creates. He appears more like a stalker than a hero but yet he acts consistently on more noble motivations – to save Harry as well as all humankind.

### **Between the Real and Magical**

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Snape is also a symbol of the permeability of the boundaries between the real world and the magical, the Utopian. He flows between and through both Hogwarts and the world of Voldemort as a double, triple agent. He plays the unique, multiple agent role; he is both in and out, who maintains links to the real world. He is liminal; he is on the edge and can go either way. He teaches skills not just for the wards' graduation but for life too, in a larger sense.

Snape is important as a teacher to both Harry (the hero) and Draco Malfoy (the anti-hero). He works behind the scenes to orchestrate Draco's free choice as well as Harry's. He stays true to the role of a paradoxical teacher. He needed to be the person who killed Dumbledore but he arrives exactly at the right moment to do this deed for Draco so that it is possible for him to choose his own Destiny. This disobedience of Draco Malfoy to Lord Voldemort whether by courage or fear, signals Draco's apprenticeship – to keep away from evil. His nod to Harry in the epilogue signifies their common destinies; they are forever united through Snape's actions. In this way, Snape, the much despised mentor becomes the true teacher of both the hero and his foil. He was a skilled teacher outside the classroom too. If Hogwarts is an oasis away from the spoils of society, it is Snape who prepares the wards for that world as well.

### **Choice of Action and Values versus Inherent Ability**

According to Dumbledore's dictum, "The essence of one's character is defined by what one chooses to do rather than by any inherent ability". (*Philosopher's Stone* 333) Snape's being on the side of the angels is a distinct choice, one that he makes despising, loathing his allies. Snape is a Dumbledore man, trained in Occlumency, and is planted within Voldemort's ranks. Snape's brilliance as student, self-possession and devotion to Dumbledore make him the perfect disciple/chemist to win the Greater War against Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Being an Occlumens, Snape is able to keep his betrayal from Voldemort, who is himself described as being "the greatest Legilimens" in history. It is only as decided by himself and the headmaster that Severus becomes the seeming double-agent and spy. Dumbledore is the Alchemist and Severus is his master Apprentice. Harry is the stuff of the Great Work through which the alchemist is working. Thus "the real story is all about Severus Snape not Harry's or Voldemort's and about Severus' war against the prevailing meta-narrative of the wizarding world" (*Unlocking Harry Potter* ch. 6 245).

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## Epilogue for a Misunderstood Person

Harry's remark in the epilogue holds true of what Snape was: "You were named from two headmasters of Hogwarts. One of them [Snape] was a Slytherin and he was probably the bravest man I ever knew" (Epilogue *Deathly Hallows*). Jenny Sawyer from *The Christian Science Monitor* claims that Snape is the only character who has a compelling inner crisis. "Snape's character ached for resolution. And it is precisely this need for resolution – our desire to know the real Snape and to understand his choices – that makes him the most compelling character in the Potter's epic" (qtd in wikipedia.org <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0725/p09s02-coop.html?page=1>)

## Benevolence of a Very Flawed Hero

The much maligned loner Snape becomes "the most heartbreaking, surprising and satisfying of all Rowling's achievements (*The Washington Post*)". Severus Snape represents the darkness that moulds us. His fall from grace and ultimate redemption makes him the most appealing of Rowling's sketches. In her interview she projects the heroic and intrinsic benevolence of Snape as "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!

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Severus\\_Snape](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Severus_Snape)

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