

SEVERUS SNAPE AS THE MODERN ARISTOTELIAN TRAGIC HERO: AN ANALYSIS OF THE *HARRY POTTER* CHARACTER

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Abstract— J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series has surpassed the world of children's literature to quickly rise as a worldwide cultural phenomenon and concurrently, provides quite a nurturing environment for a meticulous literary examination. This paper aims to make one such attempt to re-evaluate and re-analyse one of the most complex figures within the series' vast ensemble: Severus Snape, particularly through the viewpoint of an Aristotelian Tragedy. Although he is often identified as a modern 'anti-hero' or a redeemed villain, these modern labels fall short of the structural gravitas inherent in his character arc. This study fills this gap by re-establishing Snape in the context of the theoretical framework provided in the *Poetics*, mapping his trajectory against the Aristotelian tenets like *hamartia* and *hubris*, and ultimately arguing that he represents an archetypal modern tragic hero. Through a comprehensive review of several key moments in the series, and a study of the psychological makeup of Snape's divided loyalties, the research aims to reveal how his unrequited fixations become the stimulus for a classical *peripeteia*. The significance of this study rests on its potential to act as a liaison between contemporary fiction and ancient literary theory showing beyond doubt that the fundamentals of Greek tragedy continue to stay relevant in the art of modern storytelling. This research further dissects Snape's final sacrifice and the intense catharsis it engenders, thereby playing a key role in his metamorphosis from a secondary antagonist to a central tragic figure in the series.

Keywords— Harry Potter, Severus Snape, tragedy, tragic hero, *Poetics*, *hubris*, *hamartia*, catharsis

I. INTRODUCTION

Any study or analysis of contemporary literature owes a massive debt to classical literary theory, explicitly in the domains of characterisation and narrative arc. Such theoretical frameworks provide a critical viewpoint through which one can decode the structural intricacies of modern-day bestsellers. Across the broad expanse of the 21st-century fantasy genre, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* functions as a key exemplar for the character development of a tragic hero in the classical sense. Whilst the eponymous character of Harry Potter largely conforms to the conventional path of the epic or romantic hero, the figure of Severus Snape adheres to a substantially more intricate and ancient structural tradition. This study aims to showcase that Snape is more than just a modern 'anti-hero' or simply a shade of 'grey', but rather a complex and polished version of the Aristotelian tragic hero. This research will examine how Snape's arc satisfies the requisites of nobility, fatal flaw (*hamartia*), and eventual recognition (*anagnorisis*) by implementing the technical benchmarks foundational to Aristotle's *Poetics*.

1.1 Background of the Study

Aristotle's *Poetics* endures as a core text for Western literary criticism, particularly vis-à-vis the fundamentals of tragedy. Aristotle notably propounded the theory that a tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a considerable magnitude. At the heart of this theory lies the tragic hero, an individual born into nobility, who is neither an epitome of virtue nor a monster of vice, but instead someone who has a downfall because of a severe flaw or misjudgement (Aristotle, *Poetics* 13). This archetype has evolved in the course of time from the kings of Sophocles to the princes of Shakespeare, and today we can see glimpses of it in the modern psychological characters. Snape's character stands uniquely somewhere between the classical and the postmodern within Rowling's series; his hidden backstory makes his tragedy a case of retrospective discovery for both the audience and the protagonist.

1.2 Literature Review

The pre-existing literature on Severus Snape has predominantly explored him with respect to sociological or psychological elements, the focus chiefly being the origins of his resentment. In 'The Sociology of Snape', William H. Wandless's suggestion is that Snape's upbringing in 'Spinner's End' (95) becomes the underlying cause for his disposition, and that it is all a fruit of social isolation and class-based indignation. His views successfully supply the necessary context for his motivations. Nevertheless, it only shines a light on the environmental factors and misses the formal narrative structures that direct his eventual sacrifice.

Similarly, Fiona Boyle's study, among other similar ones vis-à-vis his role as a double agent, takes up the strategic prowess of his espionage for inspection. However, his "unlikeability" is ordinarily regarded by these analyses as merely a psychological aftermath rather than a calculated technical requisite of the tragic form. Terry Eagleton's *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* expands on this philosophical framework and argues that a figure of 'shattered identity' (4) is required to classify as a modern tragic hero. This research seeks to narrow the divide between Eagleton's reflection and Aristotle's classical rules.

There exists a noteworthy dearth in the existing body of work in the sense that there remains a lack of a structural mapping of Snape's evolution using classical theory. This study deconstructs Snape's characterisation and moves beyond the moral binary of 'good' versus 'evil' by combining Aristotelian tenets with modern character analysis. It puts forward the view that technical criteria

like *hamartia* and *peripeteia* are used by Rowling to create a hero whose redemption is reaped through not only mere sentimentality but also the structural requirement.

1.3 Research Problem

When reviewing the character of Severus Snape, there is a certain dichotomy that exists in his perception by the contemporary audience, which leads to an analytical stalemate within the bounds of scholarly and popular discourse. A loyal segment of the readership gravitates towards a sentimental character sketch, looking at his ultimate sacrifice as a complete vindication for all his previous deeds. Quite contrary to that, there is a rival faction that critiques his harsh pedagogical style and deep-seated rancour as unpardonable character flaws that nullify and call into question his heroic status. The research problem arises from the error in the logic of categorising Snape using the broad, modern term 'anti-hero', or more loosely a 'grey character', rather than the precise and technical substructures of the Aristotelian tragic hero.

This label of 'anti-hero' is often a general, all-inclusive term which barely signifies a character who does not possess conventional heroic values, and fails to take into consideration the precise causal techniques that Rowling utilises throughout the series. There remains a dearth of research as regards to how Snape's "antagonistic temperament" and cold nature actually act as technical requisites for the 'intermediate' hero described in the *Poetics*. The structural necessity of his flaws gets overlooked if one only looks at his actions from the modern lens of morality. The final *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* would no longer have their narrative anchoring without a notable *hamartia* and a relatable 'frailty'. This study tries to significantly fill this lacuna by re-examining Snape's arc and viewing it as the intentional and successful implementation of the classical architecture of a tragedy.

1.4 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to go beyond the moral discourse around the character of Severus Snape, and instead substantiate his narrative orientation which aligns altogether with the tenets of a classical Greek tragic hero. Therefore, this study aims to:

- examine the 'magnitude' of the character of Snape, that is, to investigate how Snape's intellectual prowess, his self-proclaimed title of the 'Half-Blood Prince' and his high hierarchical position within Hogwarts and the Wizarding World all comply with the Aristotelian prerequisites of a hero of high social status or noble stature;
- identify and analyse the *hamartia*, that is, to pin down the exact error in judgement, grounded in an explosive mix of *hubris* and unrequited obsession that sets the stage for Snape's eventual downfall and sets a course for atonement;
- outline the prolonged *peripeteia* by examining his role as a dual agent, understood as a sustained state of narrative reversal wherein the character's moral actions, unknown to the audience, invite tragic, albeit necessary public scrutiny;
- determine how the ex post facto revelation of Snape's memories in the chapter 'The Prince's Tale' acts as a formal *anagnorisis*;
- show how Snape's ultimate sacrifice evokes Aristotelian catharsis.

1.5 Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses have been formulated so that the study is steered in a clear direction:

- Snape's arc aligns to a great extent with the structural logic of a classical Greek tragedy given by Aristotle, which provided a fresh perspective on his characterisation which has been often overlooked by scholars and critics.
- Snape's cognitive prowess and his title of 'The Half-Blood Prince' play the role of a modern equivalent to one of the requirements mentioned in *Poetics*: that of a 'high stature' or 'nobility'.
- His cruelty towards students and the moral ambiguity surrounding him are not coincidental flaws but technical requirements to maintain the 'intermediate' nature of a tragic hero.
- The final revelation of Snape's memories induces a powerful catharsis, structurally resolving a substantial amount of the emotional tension in the series.

1.6 Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative methodology that focuses heavily on hermeneutics and textual analysis. The primary texts used will be J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* and *The Deathly Hallows*. These texts are analysed alongside Aristotle's *Poetics*.

A comparative framework is followed to trace the narrative units present in the text against the five pillars of Aristotelian tragedy: *hamartia*, *hubris*, *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis*, and catharsis. The study also borrows from secondary scholarly critiques to find Snape's place in the context of contemporary fantasy. Following this approach helps the research to prioritise structural evidence over subjective moral judgement.

II. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Snape's character and narrative arc bring to light a pattern resembling the design of a classic tragedy when assessed against the defining factors given by Aristotle. This analysis will study each fundamental element of the tragic hero in order.

2.1 The Condition of 'Magnitude'

Aristotle's first requirement for the tragic hero is that he must possess a significant "magnitude", a standing ensuring the character is "better than the ordinary man" (*Poetics* 15). This was nobility inherited through royal bloodlines in the classical tradition, but within the merit-driven arrangement of J.K. Rowling's wizarding world, Severus Snape represents a modern equivalent because of his intellectual mastery. This status is not a passive characteristic but a calculated construction, which starts with the rejection of his paternal heritage in the bleak industrial landscape of Spinner's End. He was born to Tobias Snape, an impoverished Muggle and Eileen Prince, a pure-blood witch and so he is a character who dwells in a transitional social space. He anoints himself with the title, 'The Half-Blood Prince', which acts as a crucial act of semantic reclamation. He adopts a persona of nobility that his socio-economic circumstances denied him by adopting his mother's maiden name. This appellation also acts as his first specimen of *hubris*: the belief that through the utter might of magical excellence, he can leave behind his "lowly" roots.

In the annotations of his old Potions textbook in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, the magnitude of Snape's character is most concretely observed. This text in particular, reveals to us a student who did not just adhere to academic laws but also reshaped them, by serving as retroactive evidence of his intellectual stature. The pragmatic shortcut to "Just shove a bezoar down their throats" (Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince* 232) and his plenty of other such scribbled corrections elucidate a cognitive prowess that marks him as exceptional among his peers. This is the "magnitude" Aristotle refers to: a hero possessing a superior ability that makes his eventual fall relevant and important to the entire plot. Snape is anything but a common soldier, he is a trailblazer who creates original magic, such as the 'Sectumsempra' spell. His eminence reaches its institutional zenith as he becomes the Headmaster of Hogwarts by the time of *The Deathly Hallows*. All this gradual elevation in his stature builds up to a cathartic culmination eventually. Aristotle remarks that a hero must endure a "change in fortune" from a high place and there are very few higher positions in the hierarchy of the Wizarding World. His "vinegar-temper" and authoritative "coldness" are the structural necessity of this high office, and not just mere flaws. His fall symbolises the collapse of a cardinal pillar of the wizarding world's resistance and fulfills the *spoudaios*, or "seriousness", and *megethos*, or "magnitude" (*Poetics* 6), essential for a true Aristotelian tragedy.

2.2 The Anatomy of *Hamartia*

Hamartia, often mistranslated as a "fatal character flaw" is more precisely defined in the *Poetics* as a "great error in judgment" (*Poetics* 13). It is essentially one of the central requirements of the Aristotelian tragedy. Aristotle further expounds the idea that "vice and depravity" should not be the leading cause of the tragic hero's downfall but instead it should be brought out by a distinct, calamitous error committed by a man who is "better than the ordinary" otherwise. When it comes to Severus Snape, his *hamartia* is not his pedagogical cruelty or his aloof temperament. Instead, it is the fallacy of orienting his formidable talents with Lord Voldemort endeavouring to acquire the "magnitude" he lacked at Spinner's End.

The critical juncture of this *hamartia* arrives in the analepsis segments of *The Deathly Hallows*, where it is brought to light that Snape overheard and conveyed the incomplete prophecy to his master. This act was prompted by a warped perception of professional and ideological obligation to a system he believed held the key to his empowerment, and not out of a hunger for infanticide. The tragedy stems from his hubris, that is, the intellectually arrogant belief that he could have the best of both worlds: serve a dark and destructive force all the while protecting his veiled obsession, Lily Potter, from the repercussions. He reacts to it with "desperate" terror the moment it dawns on him that Voldemort has tormented the Potters (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows* 544). The cycle is in motion: once the error is made, the mechanism of tragedy is triggered, and the hero is powerless in stopping the lethal consequences of his own choices. This is a vivid example of the Aristotelian requirement of "probability and necessity".

To add to that, Snape's *hamartia* is heightened by his ineptitude and myopia in looking beyond his own deep-seated resentment during his youth. What clouded his judgement and made him blind to the moral reality of his counterparts was the intellectual error of his obsession with the Dark Arts. There is an episode where we get to see a confrontation between Dumbledore and Snape on the hilltop, "If she [Lily] means so much to you," said Dumbledore, 'surely Lord Voldemort will spare her?' (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows* 544). His actions lead up to him inadvertently signing the death warrant of the sole person he loved and his horrified realisation of this fact forms the "reversal" compelled by his error. Snape is not a villain who acts out of pure malice, but rather, out of a flawed perspective, which makes his ensuing thirty years of penance a structural necessity to "purgate" the original error. The audience realises that his "bitterness" was merely the psychological callus of this initial *hamartia* during his final moments, which transmute his arc from a simple tale of a "mean teacher" into a polished tragedy of a man destroyed by one fatal misstep.

2.3 The sustained *peripeteia*

Aristotle in *Poetics* defines *peripeteia* as a "reversal of the situation" where a character's actions produce the antipode of the intended impact (*Poetics* 11). While it is common for a classical drama to feature a single, sudden reversal, through Snape's role as a double agent, J.K. Rowling executes a sustained *peripeteia* spread across seven volumes. There is a paradoxical need that defines Snape's life: he must perform "evil" acts to ensure a "good" outcome. This leads to the birth of a characterisation laced with persistent irony, where his outward actions always contradict his internal motives, satisfying the Aristotelian requirement of "probability and necessity."

The episode with the confrontation upon the Astronomy Tower in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* is when this structural reversal reaches the zenith. The act of Snape murdering Dumbledore is viewed by both Harry and the reader as the utmost proof of his villainy. On the contrary, it is revealed in the final volume that this was actually a "mercy killing" choreographed by Dumbledore himself to protect the soul of Draco Malfoy and to secure Snape's position within the Death Eaters. Snape's plea of "Severus... please..." is an ingenious narrative decoy. It is understood by the audience as a plea to spare his life, but it is actually a cry for the completion of their tragic pact (Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince* 556). This acts as the summit of Snape's tragic isolation where he is compelled to become a pariah to the people he tries to protect, the grim moment where the saviour becomes the despised.

Snape's cruelty as a professor and his "vinegar-temper" play a technical role within this sustained reversal of affairs. His cover as a loyal servant of Lord Voldemort would be logically out of the question if he were a "likeable" or "kind" mentor. His coldness is not a character flaw but a structural need that works to preserve the "intermediate" nature of the tragic hero, a man who is neither entirely good nor entirely wicked. This mode of being is what warrants that the audience's perception of him stays volatile until the final revelation. His actions produce a reversal both in the plot and in the reader's moral judgment and moves from "fear" of his malice to "pity" for the burden that he bore alone. This makes sure that when finally, the actual truth is revealed, the emotional impact is bolstered by the sheer span of the earlier reversal which culminates in a structural conclusion that only a tragic architecture can supply.

2.4 *Anagnorisis* and the Purgation of Catharsis

The final leg of the Aristotelian tragic model is contingent upon the technical implementation of *anagnorisis*, the transition from "ignorance to knowledge" (*Poetics* 11), which plays the role of a catalyst for the audience's catharsis. In the case of Severus Snape, Rowling achieves a tour de force of structural construction by reorienting this recognition. Whereas classical heroes like Oedipus go through a singular, internal experience of clarity, Snape's *anagnorisis* is a bit different: it is a retrospective revelation delivered to the protagonist, Harry Potter, and the audience synchronously. This transition is not just a plot twist but a deep structural necessity that re-examine seven volumes of narrative chronicle and transform Snape from a perceived "monster of vice" into a hero of colossal "magnitude."

During the final chapters of *The Deathly Hallows*, the point of recognition is set off in the Shrieking Shack. In his final moments, Snape offers a "silvery-blue" stream of memories, a literal vial of his truth. His final whisper, "Look... at... me..." (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows* 528), is often deciphered as an emotional plea, but if we look at it strictly from a structuralist point of view, it is a desideratum for the completion of his tragic arc. Harry (and the reader) must confront the reality of Snape's hidden identity by looking into his eyes: the 'Half-Blood Prince' who shielded his rival's son because of an undying love and loyalty to Lily Potter. This moment that shines light on Snape's tragic backstory is what Aristotle calls as the "recognition" that gives rise to a "change in fortune," modifying the reader's "fear" of Snape's malevolence into a lamentable "pity" for his solitary fortitude and endurance.

The textual evidence for this *anagnorisis* is given in the ensuing journey through the Pensieve in 'The Prince's Tale'. Each act of pedagogical cruelty and each "evil" deed, such as the murder of Dumbledore, is revealed as a calculated necessity of his tragic role. To borrow from what Terry Eagleton claims in *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, the tragic figure often possesses a "shattered identity"(4), and the fractured existence of Snape as a double agent is the ultimate manifestation of this. Snape's horror as he accuses Dumbledore of using him just to raise Harry Potter "like a pig for slaughter"(Rowling, *Deathly Hallows* 551) also reveals the moment he fully realises the moral architecture of Dumbledore's plan. The fact that he follows Dumbledore's orders all while shielding the boy reveals the moral magnitude of his sacrifice. This is where the catharsis, the purgation of emotions like "pity", is achieved. As his redemption is revealed to be not from a sudden change of heart, but from a vulnerable moral burden and an inevitability caused by his original *hamartia*, the audience is liberated from the tension of the "Snape debate". Finally, the "seriousness" (*spoudaios*) of the entire series is validated by the resolution of Snape's tragedy. His death does not just represent a casualty of the Second Wizarding War but also ultimate "purgation" of a man who lived and died carrying a moral burden and paying a personal cost of a war. The naming of Harry's son as Albus Severus Potter puts the final nail in the coffin of this catharsis; it is a public recognition of Snape's "magnitude" and his successful metamorphosis from a pariah to a saviour. By applying this Aristotelian framework, it becomes clear that Snape is not just an anti-hero or a reformed villain, but a sophisticated, modern application of the ancient tragic form. His arc is proof that true redemption and absolution is not found in mere "sentimentality" but in the "structural requirement" of a life sacrificed to rectify a "great error in judgement" (*Poetics* 13).

III. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude this examination of the character of Severus Snape, it is established that his narrative endurance rests not on the moral ambiguity that surrounds him but on the structural precision with which he inhabits the Aristotelian tragic form. If we move the discourse away from subjective moral binaries and towards an objective evaluation of his arc, we are left with a character who does not just "redeem" himself through love, but who satisfies the technical requirements of a tragedy, that is, stature, error, reversal, and recognition, with incomparable precision. In the words of critic Lorrie Moore, Snape remains "the most complicated and interesting character in the series," particularly because he is a figure of "shattered identity" who's very being becomes a site of constant conflict.

The importance of this study lies in its refusal to simplify Snape into a "hero" or "villain." Instead, it goes for an alternative reading of the series and applies the *Poetics*. In doing so it acknowledges the "seriousness" (*spoudaios*) of a character whose existence links classical dramatic theory and contemporary popular epic. Thus, this study proves as an important case study in how ancient structures can be repurposed to grant "magnitude" to a modern character.

In addition to these findings, the scope for future research also stays broad. While this study has tried to map and trace Snape's evolution through Aristotelian tenets, future research could explore the post-colonial implications of his "Half-Blood" status or a feminist critique of the "obsessive" nature of his *hamartia* vis-à-vis Lily Potter. Moreover, a comparative study between Snape and the tragic figures of Milton or Shakespeare could further cement his position in the larger literary canon.

Lastly, Snape's arc is proof that the tragic form is not a memento of the past but a living apparatus. Snape's famous declaration to Dumbledore — "Always" (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows* 552), is not just a proclamation of his love, but of the eternal nature of his role. He is the "intermediate" hero who must suffer so that the *polis* may thrive, which reminds us that sometimes the deepest atonement is that which is earned through the duty of sacrifice.

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