



Severus Snape

The Complexity and Unconventional Heroism of Severus Snape in the Harry Potter Books

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Severus Snapes komplexa och okonventionella hjältedom i Harry Potter-böckerna.

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Abstract

Being an evildoer and being evil is not always the same thing; author J.K Rowling's character Professor Severus Snape from the *Harry Potter* series is balancing on that very line. Although being unfair and mean to the protagonist Harry Potter all through the series, Professor Snape is revealed as a hero in the seventh book *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007). This essay focuses on some of the complex psychological reasons as to why Snape acts the way he does towards Harry and why many readers consider him to be just as great a hero as the protagonist. It argues that his difficult upbringing is the cause of his complexity and the series of books are analyzed from a structuralist perspective, using A.J Greimas' actantial model and Frank Kermode's theories about endings and plot twists. Snape's hate for Harry's father, caused by years of bullying, is examined as well as his love for Harry's mother. This essay also discusses in what ways Snape's change of allegiance, brought on by his eternal love for Harry's mother, is a great aid in defeating the Dark Lord.

There is no denying that when the last book in J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter*-series came out, few readers were prepared for the ending and the revealing of the supposedly evil Professor Severus Snape as one of the great heroes of the story. For almost seven books and more than 2,000 pages, Snape had been a character readers loved to hate. Since that very first meeting between Snape and protagonist Harry Potter in *The Philosopher's Stone* (1997), when Snape mocked Harry's fame and put him on the spot with difficult questions, the readers had close to no reasons to like the potions master. But all of this changed drastically in chapter 33 in the very last book *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007). With just a few chapters left of the story the radical shift in this character, who had seemed thoroughly evil all through the series, stood for one of the biggest plot twists in all seven *Harry Potter* books. Not only did he turn out to be a hero, he had also, all his life, felt a deep love for Harry's mother Lily and had risked his life on a daily basis for her – and ultimately for Harry as well. Despite being “probably the bravest man [he] ever knew” (*Deathly Hallows* 758) according to Harry, Snape did try his best to make life miserable for Harry, for no apparent reason.

In this essay I will try to explain why Snape is one of the most complex characters in the series by analyzing his childhood, his relationship to Harry's mother and father and his role as an undercover agent. Moreover, this essay gives examples on how no other character has such a big impact on the development of the story without revealing their true nature. By looking at descriptions of him growing up and how the order of events in the books leaves no clues of his intentions, I will argue that he has psychological and personal reasons for his actions which are hidden from the reader throughout the series and only revealed late in the last book. I also take a closer look at how the secrecy about his past adds to his complexity. In addition to characterization and narratology, I have made use of structuralist Algirdas Julien Greimas' actantial model to show how Snape moves along the axis of power between opponent and helper as well as literary critic Frank Kermode's ideas about turning points, endings and how readers sometimes are forced to read the story backwards after receiving the last pieces of information.

Before analyzing Snape as a character it is interesting to see that even though Snape remains a mystery throughout most of the series, this element of mystery has proven to be very much appreciated by many readers. Apart from the author, there was one person who most probably knew early on about the turn the character of Snape would take. The *Harry Potter* series has been made into movies and David Heyman, producer of the film series, says in an interview with *LA Times* that actor Alan Rickman, who portrayed Snape, did not always follow directives: “It was quite amusing, too, because there were times when a director would tell Alan what to do in a scene and he would say something like, ‘No I can't do that – I know what is going to happen and you don't.’” When the first movie came out, Snape's fate was unknown since only four books had been published and this short

comment is quite a big clue to what was going to happen, even though the statement was not made public until later. The director of the film adaptations of the first two Harry Potter books, Chris Columbus, explains in behind the scenes footage that Rickman had a separate conversation with Rowling during the shooting of the first movie and that his performance was based on that conversation: "So Alan knew something that none of us knew." In an interview for the online film magazine *Hitflix* from 2011, journalist Gregory Ellwood asked Alan Rickman if it was true that he knew about Snape's fate from the beginning and Rickman confirmed that he had had a conversation with Rowling during the first movie. Although he does not reveal exactly what was said in the conversation, he states that she told him "one tiny, little, left field piece of information that helped me think that he was more complicated and that the story was not going to be as straight down the line as everybody thought." Because of this, Rickman helped in adding to the mystery that is Snape and people who saw the movies but did not read the books would agree that his motives are difficult to understand.

Whatever information was given to Rickman, he managed to take that piece of information and portray Snape in a just as puzzling way as he was written in the books, leaving no clues to the audience of where he stands. Although often being mean and unfair, Snape's contribution to the story is one of the greatest and in more than one way he is just as much a hero as Harry.

The Harry Potter books are filled with bravery of different kinds, and perhaps Harry's courage is the most notable, but Harry's bravery is forced by the circumstances, while Snape chooses his – and he does it all for love. British newspaper *The Guardian* wrote an article about how the publisher Bloomsbury had a survey in 2011 in which people could vote for their favourite character in the Harry Potter series. Snape received 20% of all the votes, making him a clear winner, whereas the protagonist Harry Potter only just made it to the top five, taking fourth place (Pauli, *The Guardian*). This essay will suggest that some of the answer to Snape's popularity might lie in the complexity of his portrayal.

There is sometimes a very fine line between "good" and "evil" and Snape is a prime example of that, being both mean and unfair as well as a great aid in defeating Lord Voldemort. He appears to be moving along the good-evil axis within the story, a story in which other main characters are more or less clearly organized at either end of the spectrum, with no clear motives and reasons. He stays frustratingly ambiguous and it is only after finishing reading the whole series that the reader can fully try to understand the complex psychological motivation for his actions. Because of Snape's complexity, readers are forced to go back and take another, closer, look at his character.

Frank Kermode writes in his book *The Sense of an Ending – Studies in the Theories of Fiction* (1967) how readers have a deep need for intelligible ends when reading, just as humans try to make sense of their own reality. He writes that readers try to project themselves forward in the story, past the end, so as to see the structure as a whole, something that cannot be seen from the middle of

the book (Kermode 8). This theory applies to each Harry Potter book as a single work of literature, and to the series as a whole, and it applies perfectly when taking a closer look at Snape as a character. It is never clear where he stands, and the reader is forced to try to imagine the outcome, which leads to expectations. As a reader it is easy to expect Harry to defeat Voldemort, because he is the hero of the story, but because Snape behaves in such an arbitrary manner the expectations of the reader might not agree with what actually happens in the books. Kermode talks about “peripeteia”, a turning point in a drama that moves the plot to a conclusion (“peripeteia”, *Britannica*), and how it challenges our expectations (Kermode 18). The revelation of true Snape is the peripeteia of the Harry Potter series and he challenges most of the reader’s expectations when moving along the axis of good and evil without clear motives. It gives no easy satisfaction to the reader but it does, however, make for an interesting read. For example, the first book of the series is written in a way that makes Snape look like the one trying to steal the Philosopher’s Stone, which leads the reader to believe that he will be exposed as Voldemort’s associate at the end of the book. Then, during the peripeteia it is revealed that Professor Quirrell is the real associate and that Snape actually tries to prevent him from stealing the stone, thus falsifying the earlier expectations. As a result, when one is finished with reading the whole series, one starts thinking backwards, essentially reading everything backwards and is finally able to make sense of Snape and his motives.

Greimas developed his model in 1966, the actantial model, which when applied to a text, real or fiction, allows one to analyze the text and break it down with the help of the six components, or *actants* (Hébert, *Signo*). Greimas writes about the axis of desire, which consists of the subject and the object. The subject is the one trying to achieve something, the one who is trying to do or avoid doing something. The object, on the other hand, is what the subject is directed at, what is trying to be achieved or avoided. Then there is the axis of power, which consists of helper and opponent. The helper aids the subject in reaching its goal and the opponent tries to prevent the subject from succeeding. Lastly there is the axis of transmission/knowledge, which consists of sender and receiver. The sender is what encourages the subject to seek the object and the receiver is who or what would benefit from the subject succeeding in his or her quest (Hébert, *Signo*). These six components can be applied to most texts and Harry Potter is not an exception, as a book for a younger audience the characters are more or less clearly organized according to Greimas’ actantial model. Harry Potter is clearly the subject and the object is to destroy the horcruxes and ultimately Voldemort. Dumbledore can be seen as the sender, making Harry realize his destiny and providing him with reasons to seek it, and the receivers, which would benefit from Voldemort’s downfall, are Hogwarts and the entire Wizarding World. The helpers, Harry’s friends, Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix, are also evident as they are doing everything in their power to help Harry in his quest. On the other end of the

axis of power are the opponents, and in the Harry Potter series, most of them are clear; there are Voldemort and his followers, the Death Eaters, the Malfoy family and Professor Quirrell. What is interesting with Snape is that he moves along the axis of power back and forth through all seven books. Sometimes he behaves like a clear opponent, treating Harry and other students badly and killing Dumbledore, and in other instances he behaves like a helper, for example when saving Harry's life at the Quidditch game and preventing Quirrell from stealing the Philosopher's Stone. It is common for characters of a fictional text to fit more than one actant of this model, for example, Dumbledore is both sender and helper and Harry's friends can be seen as both subjects and helpers as they are equal to Harry in trying to defeat Voldemort. What makes Snape stand out as unique is how he moves along the axis of power with psychological motives and how his actions have such a great impact on the conclusion of the story. Without Snape many of the devastating events would not have happened, however, without him Harry would also not have succeeded in his quest.

When trying to understand Snape's complicated reasons, one can start by looking at his childhood, which is described for the first time in the very last book, *Deathly Hallows*. There are events and circumstances in Snape's childhood that can give some explanation to his actions and provide the reader with a deeper understanding of his motives. Much of his actions as an adult are rooted in his experiences as a child and young adult and by taking a closer look at those events, one can find some answers and clues. Rowling does not describe Snape's childhood in detail, but a few words here and there show for a quite difficult up-bringing. Growing up, his parents fought a lot (*Deathly Hallows* 544) and he did not grow up in a loving environment. When describing Harry's father James, Rowling describes him as "slight, black-haired like Snape, but with that indefinable air of having been well cared for, even adored, that Snape so conspicuously lacked" (*Deathly Hallows* 548). The fact that Rowling chose to not describe Snape's level of happiness as a child with a clear description, but rather with a comparison to the protagonist's father, makes for little sympathy from the reader. The way Snape is written as an adult makes it easier to overlook these few words about a mistreated child, just because they are put in contrast to the hero's father. The only semblance of a friend Snape ever has, as a child and an adult, is Lily Evans – Harry's mother. They are neighbors growing up and since Lily is muggle-born, having two non-magical parents, Snape tells her all about the Wizarding World. He is not fond of Lily's sister Petunia, who does not have any magical powers, and sometimes talks about, and to, her in a degrading way. But when Lily asks him if it makes a difference that she is muggle-born, he hesitates but answers "It doesn't make any difference" (*Deathly Hallows* 544), showing a strong affection for Lily already at an early age, putting his prejudices aside for her. This affection will continue all through his life and is the main reason for his change of allegiance and his hate for Harry's father and Harry himself. If this information had been clear to the readers from the start of the series, Snape's character

would have been less ambiguous. The fact that it is kept a secret until the last book points to Kermode's theories about how such structures affect the reader.

Snape's years at Hogwarts are difficult to say the least and it is the period of time in which Snape grows into the puzzling person he is as an adult. In the fifth book, *Harry Potter and The Order of the Phoenix* (2004), the reader gets a first glimpse of Snape's school years. While eleven-year-old Snape is sorted into the house of Slytherin, Lily is sorted into Gryffindor, a natural rival to Slytherin. In addition to this, Harry's father, James Potter, and his friend Sirius Black are both sorted into Gryffindor and they treat Snape badly since their very first meeting on the Hogwarts Express when Snape and Lily end up in the same compartment as James and Sirius. Snape tries to cheer Lily up, who is sad because of a fight with Petunia, by saying that he hopes they will be sorted into Slytherin. However, James interrupts and says that he would leave if he was sorted into Slytherin and that Gryffindor is where those who are brave at heart belong. At that comment, Snape makes a small, disparaging noise and James turns on him:

'Got a problem with that?'

'No,' said Snape, though his slight sneer said otherwise. 'If you'd rather be brawny than brainy —'

'Where're you hoping to go, seeing as you're neither?' interjected Sirius.

James roared with laughter. Lily sat up, rather flushed, and looked from James to Sirius in dislike.

'Come on, Severus, let's find another compartment.'

'Oooooo ...'

James and Sirius imitated her lofty voice; James tried to trip Snape as he passed.

'See ya, Snivellus!' a voice called, as the compartment door slammed. (*Deathly Hallows* 548-49)

In this passage, although Snape is quick to follow, James is the one initiating the argument. Young Snape has the capacity to be kind, trying to console Lily, but is easily triggered by James' comments. By giving Snape a negative trait right after a good one Rowling neutralizes the reader's mind and Snape's actions are never redressed. The bullying continues all through their school years. James and Sirius loathe Snape and will humiliate him when they get the chance, preferably in front of Lily, whom James fancies. They call him names, like "Snivelly" (*Order of the Phoenix* 569-70), and sometimes hex him in order to humiliate him even further. It is only natural to hate the people who treat you in that manner for that many years; Snape's reaction is only human. His suffering gives the reader an emotional investment in his development: most people have experienced teasing and other hurtful actions at some point in their lives, and can relate to that. What makes for some confusion while reading the

books is how Snape transfers his hatred for James onto Harry while the reader is left in the dark as to why that is. Before knowing about Snape's adolescence, which is described in the fifth book, the reader is forced to only see his bad traits, to only see that Snape appears to hate Harry for no reason. Once again, Kermode's theory about reading a book "backwards" is relevant as the reader begins to put some of the missing pieces of Snape's character together. Moreover, this is one of the occasions where Snape moves along the axis of power, described by Greimas.

When reading about Snape's memories in the last book, the reader discovers that Lily and Snape's friendship is lost because Lily does not like the people Snape surrounds himself with (*Deathly Hallows* 549-50) and because he had called her a "mudblood," a derogatory term for someone who is muggle-born, in a fit of rage caused by James and Sirius. Not only does he lose his best friend and the love of his life, the fact that Lily later goes on and marries James Potter, his worst enemy, must have been difficult to take. Snape's response to these years of bullying is revenge. Harry is the physical embodiment of the love shared between Lily and James and is a constant reminder of how Lily did not love Snape that way, how she chose his rival over him. Snape sees Harry, a spitting image of James, except for the green eyes he got from Lily which are always reminding him of his lost love, and decides to torment him in any way possible, often comparing him to his father:

"How extraordinarily like your father you are, Potter," Snape said suddenly, his eyes glinting.

"He, too, was exceedingly arrogant. A small amount of talent on the Quidditch pitch made him think he was cut above the rest of us, too. Strutting around the place with his friends and admirers ... the resemblance is uncanny." (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 209)

Furthermore, adult Snape is much more complex than his young version, he is constantly moving between making life difficult for Harry and lending a helping hand in various ways. It is never clear where he stands, which is especially noticeable when he unexpectedly does something opposite to what the reader thinks he would do – like saving Harry's life. Even though Snape rarely treats Harry with kindness or respect, he does save his life more than once; the first time being in the very first book, *The Philosopher's Stone* (1997), during a Quidditch game. As Harry is riding his broom, someone puts a spell on it and it tries to throw him off. Ron and Hermione see Snape in the audience with fixed eyes on Harry and muttering words under his breath (*Philosopher's Stone* 140). They assume it is Snape who put a spell on Harry's broom but later on it is revealed that it was Professor Quirrell who tried to kill Harry and Snape actually prevents Harry from falling to his death by cancelling out Professor Quirrell's curse with his own counter-curse (*Philosopher's Stone* 209). Despite saving Harry's life, Snape is still considered to have bad intentions and placed evil spectrum of the story by the reader. This is what makes Snape such a complex character: with hindsight, even though he proves his alliance with Harry by saving his life as early as in the first book, Snape's choices and actions as a teacher are just too

overwhelming. His maltreatment of Harry and his friends seems unnecessary before understanding Snape's reasons for it and stays in the reader's mind, and his good actions in saving Harry are somewhat forgotten.

Furthermore, in the fifth book, *The Order of the Phoenix*, Harry has a fake vision, planted there by Voldemort himself, of how Voldemort is torturing his godfather Sirius. To make sure it is not a trap, Harry and his friends try to contact Sirius through the fireplace in Professor Dolores Umbridge's office but are caught in the act. Umbridge tries to force them to tell who they were trying to contact and calls on Snape to give her a truth serum. After informing Umbridge that he is all out on truth serum, Snape tries to leave and Harry shouts "He's got Padfoot at the place where it's hidden!", referring to Sirius' nickname when transformed into a giant dog and the Department of Mysteries where the prophecy is hidden (*Order of the Phoenix* 567), which Snape pretends to not understand. After Harry and his friends escape Umbridge's office Snape alerts the Order that they have gone to the Ministry of Magic in order to save Sirius. He could have easily ignored the vague message and let the Death Eaters kill Harry and his friends in the Department of Mysteries. But he does not; he makes sure that help is on the way, though he does not take part in the rescue mission himself since he is supposed to still be a Death Eater at the time. From the reader's perspective, it is expected that Snape would pretend to not understand and to not care so when it is revealed that it is because of him that help was provided it reverses the reader's mind. Once again, Snape reveals how he is very much a great aid in Harry's mission and that he is an opponent to Voldemort. These expectations and reactions from the readers are a result of great penmanship from Rowling, keeping readers in the dark with the brilliant use of narrative strategies. As mentioned above, it is in the *The Order of the Phoenix* that the reader gets a first glimpse of Snape's childhood. The first memory of Snape's suffering is described, and with it James' bullying, and some of the puzzle pieces that make up this character are put in place. In contrast to this, Rowling chooses to make Snape extraordinarily callous in this book, adding bitterness to the character because of this memory and makes sure that he stays ambiguous in his actions.

Not only does Professor Snape save Harry's life on more than one occasion, he is also a great assistance in defeating Voldemort, often risking his own life. For example, in *The Philosopher's Stone*, Professor Quirrell is on a mission to try to steal the Philosopher's Stone for Voldemort in order to make the Elixir of Life and thus help him come back to life from just inhabiting someone else's body. The Stone is kept safe under a trap door, guarded by different obstacles, including a three-headed dog. Quirrell sets loose a troll in the castle and during the chaos that follows he tries to go through the trap door but Snape rushes to stop him, preventing him from stealing the Philosopher's Stone for Voldemort. In the process, he is wounded in the leg by the three-headed dog guarding the trap door (*Philosopher's Stone* 210). From the fact that the reader only knows that Snape is wounded by the

three-headed dog, it seems as if he was the one trying to steal the stone. Rowling has cleverly written the first book like this in order to not give away anything about Snape's true identity.

In addition to this, in the last book, *The Deathly Hallows*, Harry and his friends are looking for horcruxes, pieces of Voldemort's soul trapped inside an object, which are extremely difficult to destroy. One way is to use the sword of Gryffindor, which is goblin made and has been imbued with basilisk venom, but the sword is kept safe in Death Eater Bellatrix Lestrange's bank vault. At least that is what is to be believed, in reality Dumbledore made a replica of the sword and gave the real sword to Snape before he died. This is a well-kept secret all through the last book and it is only after Snape's death that the reader, and Harry and his friends, realize what Dumbledore planned and how Snape executed the plan in order to give the sword to Harry: one night, when Harry is keeping watch in the Forest of Dean, he sees a patronus in the shape of a doe. A patronus is a silver spirit guardian that often takes the shape of the animal with whom the person casting the spell shares a deep affinity (Rowling, *Pottermore*). Harry's father had a patronus in the shape of a stag and his mother's patronus was a doe, so Harry immediately trusts this other doe patronus and follows it to a frozen pond. Under the ice, he sees the sword of Gryffindor and is able to retrieve it. However, he does not see who cast the charm and it is only a lot later in the book that the reader is informed that it is Snape's patronus guiding Harry to the sword of Gryffindor at the bottom of the pond in the Forest of Dean. As it turns out, one's patronus can change because of an emotional upheaval (*Half-Blood Prince* 319) or because of eternal and un-changed love (Rowling, *Twitter*). Snape loved Lily his entire life, it was always a part of him, and that is why his patronus was the same as Lily's. Although knowing of Snape's deep love for Lily in the second to last book, Snape's allegiance is still questionable. Harry cannot understand Snape's motives, because it is kept a secret until the very last book. Because of the fact that the reader sees everything mainly through Harry, there is a tendency to dismiss all evidence of how Snape might be a good character. It also shows of Snape's movement along the axis of power, going from opponent to helper, then back to opponent.

What makes Snape one of the most important characters in the books is that he manages to do all this and still be seen as one of Voldemort's closest men. He has to make some big sacrifices in his life in order to defeat Voldemort but most of them are revealed in the last book when Harry looks at Snape's memories. For instance, when Dumbledore finds one horcrux and destroys it, he is fatally cursed. Although Snape manages to contain the curse to only his hand for the time being, Dumbledore is slowly dying (*Deathly Hallows* 556). His last request is to have Snape kill him. Apart from the emotional impact of killing Dumbledore it would also mean that he would be misunderstood and perceived as a traitor by everyone. Snape is an undercover agent; he has to play the part of an ally to his enemies and an enemy to his friends and play it convincingly, which he manages to do by killing

Dumbledore. Furthermore, in the Wizarding World, killing another human being could cause one's soul to rip apart, which is what Voldemort did to create his horcruxes. Snape knows this and, even though he questions it all, he agrees to do it for a greater cause:

'If you don't mind dying,' said Snape roughly, 'why not let Draco do it?'

'That boy's soul is not yet so damaged,' said Dumbledore. 'I would not have it ripped apart on my account.'

'And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?'

'You alone know whether it will harm your soul to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation', said Dumbledore. (*Deathly Hallows* 558)

Moreover, when the people from the Order of the Phoenix intend to move Harry from his aunt and uncle's house to a safe house they use decoys in the shape of seven identical looking Harrys. This idea is presented in the beginning of the last book as Mundungus Fletcher's but in reality it was Snape who planted the idea in Mundungus' head using magic. During the high-speed broom stick chase that follows, Snape protects Remus Lupin by trying to curse a Death Eater, still managing to keep his own disguise as a Death Eater (*Deathly Hallows* 562). This early in the last book the reader knows that Snape is part of the broom stick chase, once again categorizing him as an opponent to Harry, and is forced to look at this moment from a different perspective by the end of the book when.

One can easily state that Snape has it difficult from the start and in *The Deathly Hallows* Dumbledore says "You know, I sometimes think we Sort too soon..." (*Deathly Hallows* 555), referring to how Snape was sorted into the house of Slytherin. A true Gryffindor student has bravery as the most essential trait, and according to Dumbledore, this is where Snape indeed belongs. Unfortunately for Snape, he was sorted too soon and ended up in Slytherin where he was side-tracked and followed his peers to a more evil development and became a Death Eater, adopting their beliefs of how wizards and witches with muggle parents are less worth. His hatred for his muggle father might also have a part in that, never treating Snape in a kind way. It is not any comfort for Snape to hear that he was sorted too soon, him being sorted into Slytherin led to the greatest loss of his life when losing Lily. Essentially, he went towards the darkness whereas she ventured towards the light.

Although Snape starts out as a Death Eater, his lifelong love for Lily causes a change in allegiance. In the last book it becomes clear that the change starts with the moment when Snape accidentally overhears the first half of seer Sibyll Trelawney's prophecy that says that a boy born in the end of July will gain the power to end Voldemort's reign. At the time, Snape is Voldemort's ally and naturally hurries to tell his master. However, Voldemort interprets the prophecy as if it is Lily and James' son Harry who would become his equal, and rightly so. When realizing how Voldemort interprets the prophecy, Snape goes straight to Dumbledore, asking for help in keeping Lily safe:

‘The prophecy did not refer to a woman,’ said Dumbledore. ‘It spoke of a boy born at the end of July –’

‘You know what I mean! He thinks it means her son, he is going to hunt her down – kill them all –’

‘If she means so much to you,’ said Dumbledore, ‘surely Lord Voldemort will spare her? Could you not ask for mercy for the mother, in exchange for the son?’

‘I have – I have asked him –’

‘You disgust me,’ said Dumbledore, and Harry had never heard so much contempt in his voice. Snape seemed to shrink a little. ‘You do not care, then, about the deaths of her husband and child? They can die, as long as you have what you want?’

Snape said nothing, but merely looked up at Dumbledore.

‘Hide them all, then,’ he croaked. ‘Keep her – them – safe. Please.’

‘And what will you give me in return, Severus?’

‘In – in return?’ Snape gaped at Dumbledore, and Harry expected him to protest, but after a long moment he said, ‘Anything.’ (*Deathly Hallows* 553)

Snape feels remorse and fears for Lily’s life but cannot save her, as she is murdered by Voldemort while trying to protect baby Harry. Snape feels responsible for her death and having Lily’s death on his conscience torments him all his life, and probably contributes to his unfriendly ways. One can question how he so easily can disregard James’ and Harry’s lives, but having lost Lily once, as a friend, he desperately tries to get her back in any way possible. In *The Half-Blood Prince* (2005), Professor Dumbledore explains this by saying that Snape made a mistake and that it was the greatest regret of his life:

‘Professor Snape made a terrible mistake. He was still in Lord Voldemort’s employ on the night he heard the first half of Professor Trelawney’s prophecy.’

[...]

‘But he did not know – he had no possible way of knowing – which boy Voldemort would hunt from then onwards, or that the parents he would destroy in his murderous quest were people that Professor Snape knew, that they were your mother and father –’ (*Half-Blood Prince* 512-13)

Snape dies before Voldemort is defeated and in his dying moment, Snape’s biggest concern is to make sure that Harry knows how to destroy Voldemort by giving him his memories (*Deathly Hallows* 537). This is the most important moment in all seven Harry Potter books; it is when the reader finally is able to piece it all together and the true Snape is revealed. Only after his death is he able to redeem himself

and be released from the guilt of his greatest loss. Although Snape's hatred for James, and partly Harry, still remains during his last breath, his last words are a tribute to Lily, whom he still loves:

'Look ... at ... me ...' he whispered.

The green eyes found the black, but after a second something in the depths off the dark pair seemed to vanish, leaving them fixed, blank and empty. The hand holding Harry thudded to the floor, and Snape moved no more.' (*Deathly Hallows* 537)

This might be the first time Snape and Harry actually see each other for who they truly are, a moment where their shared love for Lily is stronger than their dislike for one another. Snape's final moment and his memories are the last components that the reader needs to be able to understand Snape completely.

Apart from Snape, no other character in the world of Harry Potter has such a big impact on the story without taking a clear stand in the war between the good and evil. There are, however, some characters that can be considered to be moving along the good-evil axis, one example would be the Dursleys, Harry's aunt, uncle and cousin, who always treats Harry poorly. However, they are muggles and therefore not really a part of the wizarding world and the ongoing war. Madam Senior Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge, who served under several Ministers of Magic, is another example. She is a sadistic racist and an all-over unpleasant person, but she was never a Death Eater. She does agree with their goals of getting rid of muggle-borns because of her prejudiced beliefs but she does it all for her own sense of power. Her contribution to the story is not that big and she is sent to Azkaban for crimes against humanity after prosecuting muggle-borns (Rowling, *Pottermore*).

The only character that could be considered to move along the axis of power in the same manner as Snape is Narcissa Malfoy, the wife of Death Eater Lucius Malfoy and mother of Draco – Harry's school enemy. In *Half-Blood Prince* Narcissa goes to Snape for help, she wants him to protect and aid Draco as he tries to assassinate Dumbledore, even though she has been told not to interfere (*Half-Blood Prince* 39-40). Her greatest concern is her son and she will do anything to keep him safe. Although only making a few appearances in the story, she does make one of the biggest contributions. During the last war, Harry walks in to the Forbidden Forest, where Voldemort and his closest are waiting, to meet his death in order to save his friends and is hit with a deadly curse, which he survives (*Deathly Hallows* 575). Voldemort sends Narcissa to Harry's body to make sure that he is actually dead. Upon noticing Harry's pulse, realizing he survived, she quietly asks if Draco is safe, which Harry nods to. She then proceeds to lie to Voldemort, saying Harry is dead (*Deathly Hallows* 594). This saves Harry's life and ultimately changes the direction entirely, allowing Harry to defeat Voldemort. However, one can argue that her contribution is not as great as Snape's as he actively and continuously contributes all through the series in various ways. Narcissa makes one short appearance on the helping side of the

axis of power, that is true, but in hindsight her character is not imperative to the story. Rowling could have excluded her and only that final scene in the forest would change.

To sum this up, no other character in the Harry Potter series is more complex than Snape; his motives and reasons are unknown until after his death in the last book *The Deathly Hallows*. Only actor Alan Rickman, who portrayed Snape in the movies based on the books, seems to have had a small clue of Snape's fate before the last book was published. Rowling has written this character brilliantly and has given him a heartbreaking backstory. There are certain events and circumstances in Snape's life, mostly during his childhood, which make him the complex character he is. He does not grow up in a loving home and he only has one friend, his neighbor Lily Evans – Harry's mother. Snape sets aside his prejudices for her and he falls in love with her, a love so strong it will last a lifetime, determining all his actions. His years at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry are horrible; he is constantly bullied by James Potter, Harry's father, and Sirius Black. They call him names and hex him, often in front of Lily whom James fancies. He loses Lily as a friend, his first loss, because he is sorted into Slytherin and misled by his more evil Slytherin peers. Lily goes on to marry James and have Harry, who looks and often behaves just like his father, and who is also a constant reminder to Snape of his loss and his hatred for James. The readers are forced to only see Snape's bad traits since his life story is kept secret until the very last book, they see the events mainly through Harry and are therefore partial to him. It is never clear to the reader where Snape stands; he makes life miserable for Harry and his friends but also saves their lives and aids them on their quest to defeat Voldemort. He starts out as a Death Eater but changes his allegiance after realizing that Voldemort is going to kill Lily and her family. He becomes a double agent and has to play a role of an enemy to Harry and makes a lot of sacrifices, including killing Dumbledore which means he would be misunderstood and perceived as a traitor as well as in risk of ripping his soul apart.

When applying Greimas' actantial model on the Harry Potter books, it is clear that the majority of the characters are organized along the three axes of power, desire and transmission/knowledge. Snape, however, moves along the axis of power, between the actants opponent and helper, in a way no other character does. The reader is forced to read the story backwards, according to Frank Kermode's theory, piecing all the pieces of information together in order to make sense of Snape and his motives. Snape is a troubled soul, burdened by demons caused by regret and the feeling of responsibility for Lily's death. He makes some wrong choices and he has to pay the price, but he gives his life for the greater cause and manages to redeem himself. His owning up to his mistakes and failures in life with the ultimate sacrifice is what makes Snape one of the greatest heroes in the Harry Potter universe, and a survey of the public's most favourite character in the series made by publisher

Bloomsberg, in which Snape came out on top, shows that his complexity is appreciated by many readers.

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