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## Severus Snape as a Byronic Figure: Romance in Harry Potter

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*In the relationship between Severus Snape and Lily Evans, J. K. Rowling portrays the potions professor and tormentor of Harry Potter as a Byronic figure. Exhibiting unrequited love, a lifelong devotion to Lily, perpetual brooding, alienation, and superiority, Snape, much like the Byronic heroes, Heathcliff in Wuthering Heights and Rochester in Jane Eyre, takes out his miserable feelings on those around him, especially Harry Potter. Snape's love for Lily, however, explains why he hates Harry so much and also motivates his efforts, finally successful, to let Harry know the truth about his feelings for his mother*

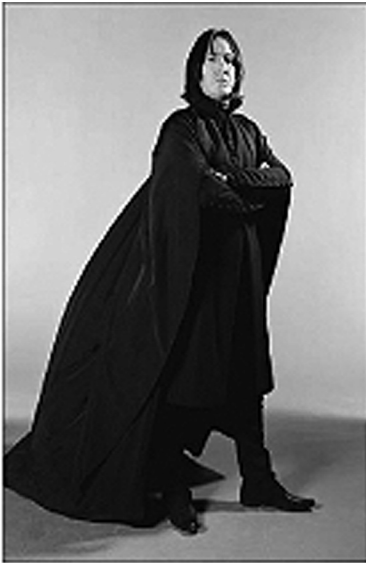
When it comes to romance, the Harry Potter books focus primarily on adolescents who experience their first romantic and sexual feelings and the stop-and-start nature of those emotional beginnings. The romance in the seven novels concerning Harry, Ron, and Hermione is often awkward as demonstrated by Harry with Cho Chang and Ginny Weasley and the piques of jealousy exhibited by Ron about Hermione. The awkwardness and jealousy suggest sexual feeling and Rowling does not flinch from telling us how Harry thrills to his first kiss with Cho, how Ron yearns for Hermione when she is with other male students “snogging,” and how, quite brazenly, he kisses Lavender Brown in places in the Hogwarts castle where Hermione can see the two of them wrapped in each other's arms. Certainly signs of adolescents' behavior.

*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, however, take us well beyond adolescent sexuality, especially the way Ginny kisses Harry so passionately that

he feels transported and Ron and Hermione finally embrace. But these are the characters' first attempts at romantic relationships. The enthusiasm with which Ron recommends the *Fail Safe Ways to Charm Witches* to Harry ("pure gold," he calls it) indicates quite clearly that Ron, at sixteen and seventeen years, is still very much the adolescent. Only such a male could think that a how-to book would tell him what he needs to know about understanding women.

But there is one relationship in the novels that while not fully revealed until the seventh book, *The Deathly Hallows*, displays the darker side of romantic love in all its adult pain. I refer to the frustrated love that Severus Snape, the potions professor and tormentor of Harry Potter, bears for Lily Evans, Harry's mother. Emanating from the time that they were children, Snape's love, lifelong and powerful, as well as his portrayal throughout the seven novels, resembles the Byronic hero that has influenced, I prefer to say haunted, the literary and creative imaginations ever since Childe Harold, Lara, Manfred and the Corsair took to the mountain passes in Europe.

The Byronic hero is as much a cultural trope as a literary phenomenon. It survives to this day in film and the hardboiled detective in fiction (think of Mike Hammer in the Mickey Spillane



*Severus Snape*

stories, or perhaps Simon Templar as the Saint) while its more famous predecessors in fiction, such as Heathcliff in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* and Rochester in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, continue to attract striking leading – and dashing – actors in films and various kinds of adaptations.

Characterized by a brooding sense whose origins are not clear, the Byronic hero is isolated from the social mainstream, aloof, and considered an outcast. Invariably, he loves a woman who rejects him. Yet he seeks her constantly,

hoping beyond hope that she will finally accept his devotion. He does not accept that his lover is simply not interested and he carries a torch for her. One result of this rejection is that the Byronic hero, when not feeling miserable, takes out his misery on those around him. In Byron's day Lord Thomas Maccaulay described the Byronic figure as "proud, moody, cynical – with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection" (qtd. in Wolfson 695).

A conspicuous feature that Professor Snape and the Byronic figure share is their contempt for humanity. Prominent among the examples of the passion and vehemence that Maccaulay describes is Snape's dislike of his students. He calls them "a big bunch of Dunderheads" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 137). In Harry's first class, Snape humiliates him when he asks questions about making potions that Harry cannot answer. Snape comments sarcastically, "Tut, Tut – fame clearly isn't everything." In a sneering voice, the tones that Snape most employs when speaking to students, he wants to know why Harry thought he could come to Hogwarts without opening a book beforehand. Calling Neville Longbottom an "idiot" when his potion fails, Snape angrily shouts at Harry, "Why didn't you tell him not to add the quills? Thought he'd make you look good if he got it wrong, did you? That's another point you've lost for Gryffindor" (139).

In *The Chamber of Secrets*, Snape calls Hermione an "insufferable know it all" and goes out of his way to clap Harry's and Ron's heads together during study hall. In that book, he appears to place Harry in difficult situations as, for example, when he arranges for Harry to duel Draco Malfoy at a school assembly. At the duel Harry communicates with a snake that Malfoy conjures via parsel tongue, convincing the Hogwarts' student body that he wanted the snake to attack a fellow student when, in fact, Harry sought to ward the beast off from a student near the stage. Nonetheless, students avoid Harry like the plague thereafter. The twelve year old, who as a baby survived the killing curse of You-Know-Who, now gains the reputation of one who would murder if given the chance.

Snape's dislike of Harry crackles in its vehemence. There seems to be no end to its depth. Whenever he looks at Harry, loathing characterizes the stare. Catching Harry as he sneaks back

to the castle after an authorized visit to Hogsmeade in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, Snape compares Harry to his father with a “face full of malice” (284). Later in the scene, “with a terrible grin twisting his face,” Snape tells Harry of the trick that James Potter and his friends played on his friends that almost cost him his life. The story concludes when Snape’s “uneven, yellowish teeth [are] barred” (285).

As we have seen, whenever Snape speaks to Harry, he sneers. Convinced that Harry has stolen gillyweed from his private stocks in order to perform the second task in the Tri Wizard Tournament, Snape maliciously threatens Harry with the banned truth serum, Veritaserum, in order to pry the truth out of him (*Goblet of Fire* 517). If part of being a good teacher is to encourage students and recognize them for their accomplishments, Snape lacks the skill. For even when Harry makes a good potion according to Snape’s instructions, Snape criticizes Harry’s shortcomings as a wizard. He tells Harry that while he may “live under the delusion that the entire wizarding world is impressed with you,” for his part, Snape considers “Potter ... nothing but a nasty little boy who considers rules to be beneath him” (516). Of the many violations of those school rules that Harry and his friends commit (and they are legion) Snape appears to note them all and throws up in Harry’s face that he thinks he is arrogant, insubordinate, and a disgrace to the wizarding community.

Nor do Harry’s friends, Ron and Hermione, fare any better with Snape. In the potions classes that they share with Draco Malfoy and the other Slytherings, Snape brushes aside their mistakes but pounds away at the ones that Ron makes and downplays Hermione’s superior knowledge. (An exception may be when Snape promises Narcissa Malfoy to help her son, Draco, complete the task of murdering Albus Dumbledore – given to the seventeen year old by Lord Voldemort in *The Half-Blood Prince*). Still, consider how Snape embarrasses Harry and Hermione by reading out loud to his potions classes the article by Rita Skeeter in *Witch Weekly* detailing Harry’s supposed romantic entanglement with Hermione. Much like Boston Red Sox or New York Yankees fans enjoying how their respective teams defeat their hated rivals, the Slithering students sneer and snicker as their professor dwells on the juicy parts of Skeeter’s gossip column. Harry cringes but can say nothing lest Snape give him detention or take points away from

Gryffindor; Hermione turns scarlet (*Goblet of Fire* 515).

Snape appears aloof and possesses few social skills. Other Hogwarts' professors seem to relate well to each other, but like the Byronic hero, Snape has cold relations with his colleagues. While he respects their expertise, they do not warm up to each other. Only the headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, trusts him. Harry notices him immediately at the professors' table on his first night at Hogwarts and wonders at this aloofness and the peculiar look about him.

The origins of Snape's disenchantment with his life, especially why he hates Harry so intensely as well as those around him, remain mysterious and unknown for much of the series of seven novels. In this respect Snape qualifies as a Byronic hero. Before *The Deathly Hallows* and its revelation of his frustrated love for Lily Evans, we know little of Snape. While a student at Hogwarts he had a lively interest in the Dark Arts and despite the fact that he was a Mudblood, he felt pride about being a member of the Slytherings. James Potter, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew, fellow students who found his dress odd and his hair unpleasant, teased him unmercifully. They called him Snivellus. One of their tricks almost killed Snape, a fact that Snape throws at Harry, adding that the only reason James Potter intervened to stop the trick was because he chickened out. Snape sees no nobility in that action. (That Lily Evans played a role in this reversal, pleading with James not to harm Snape, Harry does not learn until much later; nor does Snape tell him). Snape bears considerable dislike for each of his fellow students which we see in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* when they confront each other in the Shrieking Shack. As a young adult, Snape's interest in the Dark Arts leads him to join Lord Voldemort and become a Death Eater, the name given to the Dark Lord's followers. He bears the mark on one of his arms. After he renounces Voldemort, Snape joins the Hogwarts faculty as a professor. There, as we have seen, he tortures students yet enjoys the support of the Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. Snape wanted to teach Defense against the Dark Arts, but Dumbledore hired him to teach Potions instead. Snape does assume the potions professorship in *The Half-Blood Prince* after Dumbledore escapes the clutches of the Ministry of Magic in *The Order of the Phoenix*.

When *The Half-Blood Prince* ends, incontrovertible evidence, deepening Snape's connection to the Byronic hero in its mysteriousness, seems to appear when Snape kills Dumbledore. What makes the act so convincing is its context. When the book begins we learn that Voldemort designates Draco Malfoy, son of Lucius and a well known Death Eater, to kill the Hogwarts' headmaster. For much of the novel Harry Potter suspects Draco and attempts to learn his intentions and method. Dumbledore, of course, knows what they are. Yet when Draco finally has the Headmaster at his mercy, without a wand, he proves unequal to the task. Snape, aware of Draco's assignment and having promised his mother, Narcissa, to assist him (assistance that Draco has steadfastly refused), steps up and uses the killing curse on his employer, "Avada Kedavra!" (596).

While some readers may have suspected this development in the plot, it is nonetheless quite a jolt and its motive needs more explanation than simply Snape's frustration with Dumbledore with not getting the Defense against the Dark Arts professorship. Rowling, like another great fabulist, Charles Dickens, hides her surprises well. (Until it happens, how many readers foresee Krook's death by spontaneous combustion in *Bleak House* and how his end anticipates the ending of the Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce suit in the Court of Chancery?) *The Deathly Hallows*, the final book in the series, tells us why Snape killed Dumbledore and much else about this Byronic hero, revealing him as, ultimately, a Romantic figure. In *The Deathly Hallows* we learn that Dumbledore and Snape had a pact that, at the appropriate time, Snape would kill Dumbledore in order to spare him the pain and humiliation associated with a fatal disease that the Headmaster received from a curse hidden inside one of the deathly hallows, the ring of Marvolo Gaunt, which he had foolishly put on his finger. Of greater importance is the revelation of Snape's deep and abiding love for Lily Evans, the source of his hatred for Harry.

Frustrated and unrequited but nonetheless powerful for all that and well after Lily's death at the hands of Lord Voldemort, Snape's love for Lily explains why Snape mistreats Harry virtually from the moment he sees him in the Hogwarts dining hall. More to the point, it suggests his determination that Harry learns the truth about Snape's feelings for his mother. Why else, as he lies dying, would Snape ask

Harry to collect his thoughts for viewing in the Pensieve?

If readers do not foresee the manner of Dumbledore's death, they are genuinely surprised about the revelation that Snape loves Lily. While hinted at in the first two books of the series, the depth of this affection, begun when they were children, provides, I contend, the motivation for Snape's torment of Harry since the young wizard first entered his class at Hogwarts. Snape is envious. Further details of Lily and Snape's relationship are uncovered in the chapter entitled "The Prince's Tale" in *The Deathly Hallows* (659-690). It follows the chapter ("The Elder Wand") where Voldemort orders his snake, Nagini, to attack Snape (Chapter 32). Astounded, Harry cannot believe his eyes and feels compassion for the man who has tortured him for so long. But before Snape dies he directs Harry to collect his thoughts in a bottle that Harry examines in Dumbledore's Pensieve. (For those not familiar, the Pensieve takes strands of memory stored in a person's brain and, after they are placed into its waters, reenacts them for the wizard who looks at them.) Harry experienced the Pensieve several times before so that he knows its value. Here the Pensieve tells him that Snape loved his mother. I find the story very touching.

In sixteen scenes Harry discovers how Snape met Lily and fell in love with her, a love that inspires him all of his life and underlies his decision to help keep Harry alive in the pact reached with Dumbledore mentioned earlier (678-79). Given the passion involved, Snape strikes me as most Byronic.

But let us begin at the beginning. Snape observes Lily from behind a bush performing a magic trick. Unaware of why she can do strange things like flying through the air or moving objects, Lily is perplexed. Presenting himself to Lily and her sister, Petunia, Snape informs her that she is a witch and that he is a wizard. In subsequent scenes Snape further enlightens Lily about aspects of the wizarding world such as Dementors and Azkaban prison and, of course, the letters that each will receive inviting them to attend Hogwarts when they are eleven years old. Evident in these scenes is the growing passion of a fumbling adolescent who has formed a romantic attachment. Suggesting hidden passion, Rowland says that Snape had been planning to speak to her for some time. The first meeting does not go well (Lily runs away), but later scenes show the strong passion that Snape feels for Lily. When,

for example, James Potter takes a romantic interest in Lily at Hogwarts, Snape is jealous. He tells Lily that James, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, whom he suspects of being a werewolf, and Peter Pettigrew “are not as wonderful as everyone seems to think they are” (674). “The intensity of his gaze mak[es Lily] blush,” Rowland observes (674). Angry that James “fancies” Lily, “the words seemed wrenched from his mouth,” Snape tries to break them up. But when Lily appears to join Potter and his friends in humiliating him, Snape yells out the unforgivable word “Mudblood” at her. (In fact, Lily had pleaded for him.) The word seals any chance that Snape had with Lily, but his love seems only to deepen.

Consider the anguish that Snape experiences over Lily’s death. Sounding “like a wounded animal” and looking “like a man who had lived a hundred years of misery” Snape wishes for death (678). He wails to Dumbledore, “I thought you were going to keep her safe” (678). Sensing “remorse” in Snape (for he was still working for Voldemort at the time of Lily’s death), Dumbledore tells him if he truly loved Lily then his “way forward is clear and that is to help [Dumbledore] protect Lily’s son” (679).

Though somewhat displaced, note how the Byronic hero pursues his love and remains true to the woman that he has loved all of his life. For I suppose we have to say that Snape does protect Harry. But it’s not with friendship or the kindly guidance that Remus Lupin gave to Harry in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* when he taught him how to cope with Dementors. Nor is it with special instruction in Occulmency, the ability to ward off attempts to enter other people’s minds, that Snape endeavors to teach Harry at Dumbledore’s request in *The Order of the Phoenix*. The lessons are designed to assist Harry from being contaminated by Voldemort’s thoughts. But when Harry gets too close to Snape’s thoughts about his troubled childhood, he calls the lessons off.

Rather, it is as a double agent spying on Voldemort for Dumbledore that Snape proves useful, one may say, even essential to Harry. The spying places Snape in grave danger since the Dark Lord reads peoples’ minds with ease, but Snape’s love for Lily inspires him. Perhaps we can say that as Lily’s love for her son protected him from Voldemort’s killing curse, Snape’s devotion to Lily enables him

to keep his thoughts from Voldemort. What I consider the most telling and touching example of Snape's affection for Lily, six years after her death, takes place when Snape objects strongly to the idea that he and Dumbledore protected Harry only to see him die at Voldemort's hands. He says, "I have spied and lied for you. Everything was supposed to keep Lily Potter's son safe. Now you tell me you have been raising him, like a pig for slaughter ..." (687). Casting aside Dumbledore's comment that he now cares for Harry, Snape fires Lily's patronus (a silver doe) from his wand which bounds across the office and soars out the window. As the doe leaves the room Dumbledore turns to Snape and sees that "his eyes were full of tears," and comments, "After all this time?" "Always," replies Snape (687). The Byronic hero's love for the woman in his life is fully displayed in tormented splendor.

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