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Sectumsempra: An Analysis of the Heroic Transformation of Severus Snape

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> *"You see what you expect to see."*
> --Albus Dumbledore

The sky is grey, the clouds are heavy, and the boy cannot kill him. The Death Eaters taunt him, berate him, but Draco cannot kill Albus Dumbledore. Harry is immobilized with fear, trapped under his invisibility cloak. Suddenly, a figure appears. Snape comes in the door, and Dumbledore pleads with him. With a look of disgust, Severus Snape does the unthinkable. The killing curse is uttered, Dumbledore's body falls from the tower, and my heart drops. In that moment, I hated Severus Snape.

J.K. Rowling, along with help from the great Alan Rickman, created a character who is often loved, sometimes despised, and nearly universally

recognized. Severus Snape, a wizard who wears many hats throughout the Harry Potter series, is one of those rare characters that can fill you with love and hate simultaneously. The first time I read *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the final book in the series, and Rowling takes us on a journey through Snape's memories, I cried. In that moment, Snape became my hero.

This chapter seeks to examine the character Severus Snape and his heroism. I will go about this task by analyzing Snape's life and legacy, and judging him through several lenses of heroism science. Most importantly, the goal of this discussion is to determine whether or not Snape is truly a "hero." Whether you love him or hate him, Severus Snape is one of the most recognizable literary characters of the twenty-first century, and his morality and merits are still talked about by fans of the Harry Potter franchise. I will use traditional archetypes and theories of heroism science to determine who and what Snape really is: a hero or a villain.

who is snape?

For those of you unfamiliar with the *Harry Potter* franchise, Severus Snape has a very complicated backstory. For the first few novels, Snape is presented to us as the surly Professor of Potions at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. In later novels, it is revealed that Snape is working as a double agent against the primary antagonist of the series, Lord Voldemort, a sadistic wizard bent on ridding the world of muggles, non-magical humans, and establishing himself as leader. Snape seems to have sided with the antagonist in the sixth novel when he kills Hogwarts' headmaster Albus Dumbledore, betraying the trust of the chosen one, Harry Potter, and many other school children. It is only after Snape's death in the final book of the series that Harry is allowed to look through Snape's memories and see that his true loyalties lied with Dumbledore all along and his death was necessary in order to defeat Voldemort (Rowling, 2017).

Snape and the Hero's Journey

Joseph Campbell, the scholar who anticipated the field of heroism science, described the hero's journey as follows: "a hero embarks on a journey that begins when he or she is cast into a dangerous, unfamiliar world. The hero

is charged with accomplishing a daunting task and receives assistance from unlikely sources. There are formidable obstacles along the way and villainous characters to overcome. After many trials and much suffering, the hero learns an important truth about herself and about the world. Succeeding on her journey, the hero is forever changed and returns to her original world. There she bestows some type of gift to that society, a gift that is only made possible by her own personal journey of growth and change. In short, heroes undergo a personal transformation that includes the development of a motive to improve the lives of others" (Allison, Goethals, & Kramer, 2017).

Campbell's monomyth of heroism is seen across myths and tales from countless cultures from around the world and from different time periods in human history (Campbell, 1949). We need to keep this fact in mind when analyzing Snape. He is a literary figure. In analyzing him psychologically, we can forget that he is authored, he is scripted, his journey was laid out purposefully by an author. Does this detract from his impact? Not in the slightest. All this means is that we can hold Snape to a different standard than we could someone's act of heroism in real life. He is a character, and he should be judged as one. Allison and Goethals (2017) point out, the monomyth indicates that three transformations must transpire in order for the traditional heroic archetype to be met: a transformation of setting, a transformation of self, and a transformation of society (Allison & Goethals, 2017; Davis et al., 2011). Snape can be placed against these three criteria to determine whether or not he is a traditional literary hero.

Transformation of Setting

This is the most obvious of the three criteria, in that Snape moves from his muggle life to Hogwarts at a young age, establishing the onset of his journey (Rowling, 2002). He goes from a world without magic to a world with magic. Introduction to the supernatural is in every hero's journey from Odysseus to Luke Skywalker. This change took place early in life relative to many of Snape's endeavors, but it is the catalyst for everything else that transpires later.

Transformation of Self

Throughout his journey, Snape was a member of many groups: the bullies of Slytherin House at Hogwarts, the Death Eaters lead by Lord Voldemort, and finally the Order of the Phoenix, a group of a good wizards fighting against Voldemort. In order to become a member of any one of these groups, Snape had to change himself in some fashion. However, changing his allegiance does not inherently mean that he transformed himself. Changing teams alone does not a hero make. However, if we take into account some viewpoints from Kinsella et al. (2015a) we have a different metric by which to judge Snape: "Consistent with the etymology of the word, heroes are protectors (Becker & Eagly, 2004) and our research suggests that heroic functions reflect this theme: protecting, doing what no one else will, helping, saving, guiding, and acting against evil or danger" (Kinsella et al., 2015b).

Keeping in mind Kinsella et al.'s (2015b) idea of heroes being protectors, it is apparent that Snape does eventually become a protector. Despite all of his hatred towards Harry's father and Snape's former schoolmate, towards himself, and even towards Harry at times, Snape moves beyond his hatred and insecurities to become a protector. In the sequence where Harry goes through Snape's memories, we see Snape's troubled past, his horrifying time with the Death Eaters, and his misery before being rescued by Dumbledore. Most importantly in this sequence, we see an exchange between Dumbledore and Snape where we learn Snape puts his life in danger by being a double agent in order to protect Harry Potter, the only one who can stop Voldemort (Rowling, 2016). This idea of Snape being the protector and Harry receiving the benefits of his protections shows that the subject of Snape's heroism extends beyond himself, as someone else benefited more than the transforming subject (Allison & Goethals, 2016, 2017). The exchange between Snape and Dumbledore demonstrates that Snape in some way has transformed himself by wanting to protect Harry Potter, the son of his childhood rival. Putting aside all his anger and doubt to protect someone else for the greater good seems to fit the idea of transforming oneself, and thus completes the second phase of the hero's transformation.

Transformation of Society

In the society presented in the book, the primary source for most of the magical world's problems is the antagonist Voldemort. To be fair, there are other problems in this world, such as wizard blood purists who hate anyone with muggle blood and obvious political corruption regarding the Ministry of Magic, the governing body of wizards (Rowling, 2002). However, as a large part of the two aforementioned problems stem from Voldemort or are legally enforced by his agents, we can safely assume that removing Voldemort will also slow down many of the novels' secondary conflicts.

The primary hero of the franchise, Harry Potter, undergoes much suffering, the loss of close friends, and self-discovery, eventually defeating Lord Voldemort and effectively saving the wizarding world. Harry however, did not find himself in a position to conquer the Dark Lord all by himself. Only through the help of many allies and sacrifices of others was Harry able to successfully fight Voldemort. As previously discussed, Snape was one of the key players in protecting and training Harry to fight Voldemort. Does this mean Snape himself transformed the society? In a direct sense, no. Given that Snape did not directly defeat Voldemort, he did not directly transform society. However, Snape's actions in protecting Harry do lead to some monumental change in society. If there is a transitive property of heroism, I would argue this applies. Snape is not the protagonist of our story. Therefore, by some metric, he will never fully be "the hero." However, in protecting the hero of our story, his actions and sacrifices ultimately led to a change in society through the peace brought about by Voldemort's death that happened outside of his life span. From this perspective, I argue that Snape has transformed society, and thus fulfilled the monomyth of Heroism.

Other Lenses of Heroism

Rowling's novels give us a phenomenal glimpse into the psyche and motivations of her characters, which gives us a much broader range in which to explore Snape. True, he does meet Campbell's criteria for a "hero," but is he truly heroic? Do his motivations, desires, and actions line up with what we think of as being attributes of heroes? We can analyze him as a literary character easily, but he's robust enough that I thought it would be fun to also

analyze him psychologically. On that note, the rest of this chapter will be dedicated to reviewing the psychology of Snape, and whether or not he is a hero in the scientific and perceptional sense rather than strictly through the lens of literature.

WHAT KIND OF HERO IS SNAPE?

There are several taxonomies for classifying heroes, from Franco and his colleagues' situational demand taxonomy (Franco et al., 2011) to Allison and Goethals' social influence-based taxonomy (Allison & Goethals, 2013). The first step in determining if Snape is truly a hero would be to determine what type of hero he may be. These taxonomies provide a great metric for determining hero subtypes. Many of them have caveats, nuances, or places of failure against which we can measure Snape to establish whether he meets the criteria for heroism.

Social Influence Based Taxonomy

Allison and Goethals provide a useful taxonomy for classifying heroes, including trending, transitory, transitional, tragic, transposed, transparent, traditional, transfigured, transforming, and transcendent (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Several of these categories might apply to Snape. The first and most familiar one is the Traditional Hero. This hero's journey corresponds to Campbell's (1949) monomyth, with individuals coming from humble origins, experiencing early setbacks, receiving assistance from unlikely sources, overcoming obstacles, and returning with gifts to society (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Obviously, this sounds much more like the iconic protagonist of the series, Harry Potter, but it can also apply to Snape. He grew up impoverished, went through a phase with the Death Eaters, received help from Dumbledore, overcame trials at Hogwarts, protected Harry, and brought about peace (Rowling, 2017). While this sounds good, there are some counterarguments to be made about his heroism. First, he willingly joined the Death Eaters and terrorized people, so his setbacks are really of his own making. Dumbledore's assistance is not altruistic, as it seems more like Dumbledore is making a plea deal with Snape. Finally, Snape has no traditional, tangible gift to society, but rather Harry benefits from Snape's transformation. Therefore, a different classification might be better.

A second hero subtype category Snape might fit into is that of a Transposed hero, which is a hero who undergoes rapid changes from either villain to hero or from hero to villain (Goethals & Allison, 2012). Snape throughout the series walks a fine line between hero and villain, and at certain points jumps back and forth. The scale of his greater transformation from villain to hero was slow, and some may argue he never fully made that transition with his allegiance to Voldemort being strong for so long.

Finally, Snape may be a Transparent hero, which is an invisible unsung hero (Allison & Goethals, 2017). While working in the shadows and planning on overthrowing Voldemort, he was a real menace to the children at Hogwarts. His time as headmaster was one of hardship and cruelty, and Harry nearly despised him until after his death. While he does appear to be an invisible hero, he was a very visible villain. So if Snape's character defies solid placement in this taxonomy, where else might his journey place him?

Situational Demand: Physical Risk

The first question we need to answer regarding Snape being a physical risk hero is whether or not Snape is duty bound to be put his life on the line. Physical risk duty bound heroes are "individuals involved in military or emergency response careers that involve repeated exposure to high-risk situations. Heroic acts must exceed the call of duty" (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011). In the series there are two wizarding wars, and Snape fights in both on different sides. Later in life he does join the *Order of the Phoenix* and work under Dumbledore (Rowling, 2016). While all of these positions do involve physical peril, that's not where the danger that faces Snape comes from. He has not enlisted in a real governmental war, he is not paid to stop evil wizards, and therefore he is not duty bound. Snape works underground as a double agent, and often times because of his treachery and allies needs to fight. Fighting is a consequence, not a requirement, of his actions. He still puts his life on the line but, "the standard for duty-bound and non-duty bound physical-risk heroism differs, but the style of engagement and potential sacrifices are comparable" (Franco et al., 2011). Peril comes to Snape as a result of his allegiance. Snape doesn't go out trying to thwart dangerous wizards from doing harm. Dangerous wizards come to hurt Snape for his intelligence. Therefore, Snape is not a physical risk hero.

One could argue that the hex the Death Eaters place on Draco Malfoy eventually does make Snape "duty bound" in a sense. Dumbledore knows Draco must kill him, but he pleads with Snape to do it in order to preserve Draco's innocence. Draco inevitably fails, and Snape is the one who physically kills Dumbledore (Rowling, 2017). However, "It can be argued that the action or behavior ultimately stands as heroic or not in the absence of any social milieu" (Howerth, 1935). Snape knows that killing Dumbledore is a necessary step in defeating the one who placed the hex on him. His loyalties lie not with the Death Eaters, but with Dumbledore. Therefore, Snape is not duty bound to be heroic or villainous because he does it out of love and loyalty to a greater social cause.

Situational Demand: Social

If Snape does not fit into the physical risk hero, then Snape may fit into a few other categories. Under Franco et al.'s social hero taxonomy includes religious figures, politico religious figures, martyrs, political leaders, adventurers, scientific heroes, good Samaritans, underdogs, bureaucracy heroes, and whistleblowers (Franco et al., 2011). The only one of these that really comes close to Snape is a martyr, which is defined as "Religious or political figures who knowingly (sometimes deliberately) put their lives in jeopardy in the service of a cause or to gain attention to injustice" (Franco et al., 2011). Snape lives in proximity to danger in order to fight against Lord Voldemort. However, he is not really a "political figure" as the definition specifies, as he fights for the side that eventually kills him, and his death does not bring light to any social injustice as he dies because Voldemort wants something from him. So, what is Snape?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Snape holds many loyalties to many groups throughout the series. One of his most impactful and relevant to our discussion is his relationship to the Death Eaters and Voldemort. Most of his life as a young adult was spent committing heinous crimes in an attempt to bring Voldemort back to power. Many could look at Snape and say that because he had an allegiance to Voldemort he is disqualified as being a hero. This is in line with Franco and Zimbardo's assertion

that "even unvested observers may be quick to negate the hero's acts at the slightest hint of countervailing information about the hero's integrity, motives, or intentions— even if these aspersions have no real bearing on the heroic act itself. There is a constant tension between the desire to elevate and the desire to castigate the actions of heroes— especially social heroes because their actions are easily viewed as threatening, but also with physical risk heroes who have a checkered history" (Franco & Zimbardo, 2006). Snape indisputably has a past lined with bodies and broken promises. However, in the end Snape fights for the good guys, protects Harry Potter, and dies trying to do the right thing. So, does his past besmirch his name so much that he cannot be a hero?

I argue that what would cause one to view Snape as a hero rather than a villain is how much weight one puts on what he did behind the scenes versus what he did publicly. To the wizarding world, Snape was a monster. He personally killed Dumbledore, and by all outward appearances, allowed Voldemort and the Death Eaters to take over Hogwarts. This makes Snape seem cold and against the side of the "good wizards." Snape was mean to Harry, harsh on all his students, and knowingly allowed the suffering of thousands. However, all of these actions represent what Snape did publicly. As we know from the memory sequence, all of this was part of a larger plan to defeat Voldemort; all the suffering and harshness was to some degree necessary for the plan to be executed fully.

In some situations, heroes with negative personal histories can be rebranded as heroes, while in other circumstances context overrides heroism (Franco et al., 2011). This is the inevitable moral paradox we encounter. Does Snape's private history of good override his public actions of evil? Is he an unsung hero (Goethals & Allison, 2012) or a villain who did good things? And truthfully this is where we must let our morality guide us. One thing is clear: Snape, for good and for evil, acted in the long-term best interest of the well-being of the larger society (Efthimiou, Allison, & Franco, 2018).

One final point I will make comes from the argument of failed heroism versus cowardice. The debate is whether or not his decisions stem from the situation, meaning that describing him as a hero would be false, or whether he in and of himself wants to help others, while the situation around him merely activates

him (Parks, 2017). Snape agreed to help Harry before we knew the breadth of his assignment. He took on this task before he knew what the risks were. Snape did not think there would be rewards and "...anticipated gain at the time of the act necessarily disqualifies it from being heroic. However, if gains are subsequently accrued without prior anticipation or motivation to attain them, the act should still be upheld as heroic" (Glazer & Glazer, 1999). Snape gained nothing, helped the world, was motivated by love, and in the end lost his life. If that is not a hero, then what is one?

Severus Snape is one of those characters people love to hate. He, along with other compelling characters, is why Harry Potter has such staying power in modern society. Above all else, Snape is emotionally complex, with a past murky enough to be unforgivable and a heart big enough to be deserving of redemption. Through one lens or another, Snape is a hero in the literary sense. He has his initiation, he goes out and transforms himself, and through his transformation bestows a boon on society. Snape's personal transformation is one of the greatest in modern literature, because we learn of it under such sad circumstances. Snape is a great example of how the hero's transformation can take place in a person that many may not find heroic. His actions meet the criteria but his past and morals complicate him in a delicious way. As readers, we cannot definitively classify him as heroic, villainous, or something else, because at a certain point Snape's impact moves out of the scope of the novels and into us. We must judge him by our own sacred values, which will make this argument subjective for as long as morality is subjective.

The goal of this chapter was to present Snape alongside archetypal and scientific heroism studies and give the reader the opportunity to decide whether Snape was a hero or villain with some scientific knowledge. So, which is it?

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