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Voldemort's Villainous Journey: An Examination of the Dark Lord Archetype

Few works of children’s and young adult literature have had quite as much of an impact on popular culture as the *Harry Potter* novels by Scottish author Joanne K. Rowling, even when considering similar works of fantasy and juvenile fiction spanning the 20th century. In addition to the literary hepatology, there have been eight feature film adaptations of the novels, a series of literary spin-off franchises with their own cinematic adaptations, electronic game tie-ins, a stage play, and an entire theme park dedicated to the Wizarding World, the magical universe Harry Potter inhabits contrasted with the mundane world of humans with no magical abilities, referred to as Muggles in the books. In explaining the enduring popularity and legacy of Rowling’s magnum opus, authors such as Julia Boll point to the model of the *monomyth* or hero's journey as being instrumental to the plot (Boll 85), taking readers through the progress of Harry Potter’s hero’s journey. By contrast, I diverge from her analysis by examining the life of Tom Riddle, alias Lord Voldemort, in relation to the hero’s journey. Through gradual revelations by Rowling starting from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Lord Voldemort is progressively revealed as a character who, under different circumstances, might have followed a similar progression as his adversary. My contention is that, although not a hero in any sense of the word, the monomyth is still applicable to Tom Riddle’s life story by virtue of him being a dark reflection of Harry Potter whose destiny is inextricably connected to the latter and is differentiated by the choices they make under comparable circumstances.

The hero’s journey, a term coined by academe and professor of comparative mythology Joseph Campbell, refers to a narrative paradigm “in which a heroic protagonist sets out, has transformative adventures, and returns home” (Burke *et al*). This format, argues Boll, corresponds to the master plot of children's fiction with its stages of *home*-*away*-*homecoming* (Boll 87). In developing this plot structure, Campbell drew inspiration from the work of Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung who proposed that there was a more impersonal and universal part of the psyche housing all the cumulative knowledge, experiences, and images experienced by humanity, known as the *collective* *unconscious*. Stored within the collective unconscious were patterns or images of repeated human experiences (e.g., birth, death, the four seasons) expressing themselves in dreams, fantasies, stories, and religions known as archetypes (Bressler 131). This pattern of character design, plot development, and worldbuilding has been instrumental in creating some of the most outstanding works of fiction, most notably in the fantasy genre.

For all its merits as a means of storytelling and creating memorable protagonists, there is a dimension of the monomyth that is not examined as meticulously. The value of a protagonist as a character is often compared and contrasted with that of their antagonist. In the case of a fantasy hero archetype such as the Magician in the case of Harry Potter, their qualities are compared and measured against those of villainous archetypes such as the Dark Lord, a character so frequently dismissed as a one-dimensional stand-in for pure evil existing for the express purpose of being the ultimate barrier to the hero’s destiny and not as a character in their own right. Lord Voldemort is a prime example of this tendency, although to her credit, Rowling makes a greater effort to present Voldemort’s complexities as the series progresses. While the character is first introduced in the first book of the series *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (known as *Harry Potter and the* *Sorcerer’s Stone* in the United States), it is in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* that Harry can converse with an apparition of Voldemort’s younger self and the reader learns what the two characters have in common. Both characters are “…half-bloods, orphans, raised by Muggles. Probably the only Parselmouths to come to Hogwarts since the great Slytherin himself” (Rowling 233) and even have a passing resemblance to each other. As Harry recovers from his confrontation with Voldemort in the Chamber of Secrets, Professor Dumbledore reveals that “Lord Voldemort-who is the last remaining descendant of Salazar Slytherin-can speak Parseltongue,” (Rowling 245) and that Harry’s ability to speak the magical language of snakes is an unintended consequence of the latter’s attempt on his life as a baby, resulting in him inheriting some of his enemy’s powers as well as his characteristic lightning-shaped scar. In addition to this rare magical gift, Harry possesses “resourcefulness…determination…a certain disregard for rules…” (Rowling 245), all traits that are prized among students in Slytherin House such as Tom Riddle, alias Lord Voldemort. What sets the two adversaries apart, however, are the choices that they make; as Dumbledore puts it, “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities” (Rowling 245). Like several other works of fantasy fiction– the theme of the conflicts between fate, choice, and destiny are prevalent in the Harry Potter series and are of the most relevance to the hero’s journey as a plot as it guides its progress and shapes its outcome.

Joseph Campbell also describes the stages of the hero’s journey in *The Hero with A Thousand Faces* as a magnified version of the rite of passage: *separation* – *initiation* – *return* (Campbell 28). Turning our attention to Voldemort, each station of the hero’s journey can be applied to his own story and readers can examine where the fates of the two characters diverge and how they produce two conflicting characters. Starting from the stage of separation, we find a young, orphaned boy named Tom Riddle, whose witch mother dies giving birth to him and whose Muggle father abandons him to grow up in an orphanage where he is the only inhabitant of mixed magical ancestry. It is here that we see Tom Riddle deprived of the “normal experiences available or permitted to the members of his society” (Vogler 90-91), both as an orphan in the Muggle world and as a wizard who has not yet been introduced to the Wizarding World by way of Hogwarts. It is during this stage that Tom receives the call to adventure after being invited by Albus Dumbledore to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Unlike Harry Potter, Tom Riddle does not appear to have resisted his call to adventure, initiated by the future Headmaster himself. It is from here that we see a change in the trajectory of Tom Riddle’s hero’s journey even if he does progress to the next stage of encountering a threshold guardian that he will either conquer or appease (Campbell 30).

In Tom Riddle’s case, Headmaster Armando Dippet serves as Riddle’s threshold guardian when he potentially prevents the latter from fulfilling his destiny as the heir of Salazar Slytherin. Having opened the Chamber of Secrets, Tom releases the Basilisk, the creature that dwells in the chamber and sets it on a young half-Muggle student, the future Moaning Myrtle. Following Myrtle’s death, Headmaster Dippet informs Tom that he must return to the orphanage where he grew up for his own safety, if only for the school holidays. Tom avoids this fate by framing a young Rubeus Hagrid for his own misdeed, thus befriending Dippet by earning his trust and being awarded “a nice, shiny, engraved trophy” (Rowling 180) for his efforts. The only remaining threshold guardian would be then-Transfiguration teacher Professor Dumbledore who appears to be the only one convinced of Hagrid’s innocence and continues to suspect Tom of wrongdoing, keeping “an annoyingly close watch” (Rowling 230) on him. Only by keeping a low profile and preserving himself through magic in the pages of his diary is the future Lord Voldemort able to “defeat” his second threshold guardian.

In the traditional hero’s journey, the Initiation stage “sees the hero embarking upon a 'road of trials,' which will prepare him for the final meeting with the antagonist,” during which the hero “will acquire tools, keys and amulets, forge a team and distinguish friends from enemies” (Boll 99). In the case of Voldemort, his road of trials occurs twice throughout his reign of terror on the Wizarding World. He begins by distinguishing himself as “poor but brilliant, parentless but so *brave*, school Prefect, model student” (Rowling 230), slowly acquiring the knowledge, resources, and, quite literally, the amulets he would need to become the Dark Lord. As his influence grows, he proceeds to amass an inner circle of henchmen and an army of followers among the Wizarding World’s elite. Voldemort’s road of trials first comes to an end the night he murders Harry’s parents, only for his curse to backfire on him when he turns the wand on an infant Harry. As a result of this botched murder attempt, Voldemort inadvertently imprints himself into his sworn enemy, imbuing him with some of his powers. Having lost his physical body, Voldemort embarks once more on his road of trials by challenging Harry through various means. In the case of *Chamber of Secrets*, Voldemort uses his former self’s diary as a literal amulet through which he can confront his foe by making use of what little magic he is still able to wield until the events of *The Goblet* *of Fire* when he is physically resurrected with the unwilling assistance of Harry (Boll 100).

As the road of trials ends, the hero progresses into what Campbell calls the *innermost* *cave*, representing a descent into Hell to rescue a loved one or a journey through the land of the dead to discover what lies at the heart of the special world (Boll 100) that the hero has entered after accepting the call to adventure and defeating the first threshold guardian. This is what author Matthew Flax describes as “the point of utmost danger, where the hero will face their ultimate test…a place of darkness and despair” (Flax 2022). Whereas Harry experiences this stage several times throughout the hepatology, most notably when he faces Tom Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets and when he “battles his inner demons and subconscious fears and learns the prophecy about his destiny” (Boll 100) in *Order of the Phoenix*, it is unclear at what point Tom Riddle passes through this stage on his way to becoming the Dark Lord. It is here where the journeys of Voldemort and Harry Potter arguably bifurcate, resulting in two very different outcomes for the two characters.

Next comes the *supreme ordeal*, where the hero undergoes his deepest crisis; the antagonist’s powers are at their peak and the “hero appears to die, witnesses or causes death and faces his shadow” (Boll 100). While Voldemort arguably suffers a similar experience when he loses his body and his powers the night of Harry’s parents’ death, he is neither capable of or willing to face his shadow, surviving instead as an incorporeal antagonist acting through his many allies and agents until he can regain his physical form. It is equally at this juncture that the hero may experience atonement with a parental figure (Campbell 120, 135). For Boll, Voldemort fulfils the role of both Harry’s shadow and a dark father figure due to having imprinted part of his power and personality traits on to him (Boll 101). What distinguishes the two characters, she adds, is Harry’s “evolutionary superiority over Voldemort” that allows him to “reconcile himself with the loss of his parents...return from the sphere of death fully grown and use his 'wholeness' as leverage” (Boll 102) against his ultimate enemy. While the orphaned Harry Potter emerges from his ordeals with a state of self-acceptance, reconciled with his loss and empowered by his parents’ love for him, the equally orphaned Tom Riddle is incapable of understanding love, much less experiencing it (Boll 101). This seems to extend to self-love as evidenced by the rejection of his “filthy Muggle father’s name” (Rowling 231) and causes Tom Riddle to forego the atonement with his literal father figure, who he condemns as “a foul, common Muggle, who abandoned me even before I was born, just because he found out his wife was a witch” (Rowling 231). By willingly foreswearing this reconciliation stage, Voldemort fails at the supreme ordeal and is ultimately vanquished by his shadow to be consigned to oblivion at the end of the series.

Rowling’s masterful application of the hero’s journey with all its associated symbols, archetypes, and conventions to the adventures of her titular character reveal how, despite its arguably archaic nature, the monomyth can still be a lens from which to examine other characters in the series. When applied to Tom Riddle, alias Lord Voldemort, it becomes apparent that the Dark Lord, far from being a stock character to be applied formulaically, is a personage in his own right who is equally the subject of his or her own hero’s journey. Both the hero and his dark counterpart answer the same call to adventure, might experience the same threshold guardians, and might face their inner demons at various points. In the case of the Harry Potter series, this journey is a more cyclical process, thus allowing Rowling to stretch this seemingly linear progression into several books. What seems to distinguish Voldemort from his heroic half lies in a tragic flaw compelling him to make choices that ultimately destroy him as it does so many characters before and since. Whether this qualifies Voldemort as a variant of a tragic hero is highly debatable, but it is certainly a lens through which other writers might view Voldemort’s voyage into villainy.

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