

**Naming “He Who Must Not Be Named”: Analysing Lord
Voldemort as the Villain of the “Harry Potter” Series in a New
Light**

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Abstract

The villain, like the fool, has remained a classic archetype from Shakespeare to Disney. However, unlike the fool, it is impossible to pin the villain down to any stereotypical characteristic traits---because the “baddie” is a shadow of the “goodie”, and the villain’s personality is determined according to the strength and weaknesses of the hero.

Our paper proposes to discuss J.K.Rowling’s presentation of one of the darkest villains of all times in her “Harry Potter” series---the cold blooded murderer Lord Voldemort. The terror of Voldemort’s villainy is shown to have spread within the magical community to such an extent that the witches and wizards do not dare to even take his name. “You-know-who” is the closest they would come to calling him anything, even in the first three books of the series, where he is barely more than dead. Even the robot in “The Terminator” whose sole purpose was to wipe out humanity, doesn’t bother about the babies, but Voldemort had, in his lust for power, attempted to murder the baby Harry. In our paper, we would offer some new critical perspectives of the character of Voldemort by contrasting him with the hero Harry and also tracing the causes of the former’s origins of hate within his neglected childhood.

The very mention of the word “villain” conjures up in our mind the image of a coal black personification of the principle of evil. It is also a truth that no avid reader of literature can deny that from blood-sucking Dracula to Shakespeare’s scheming Iago---villains have

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always provided some of the most memorable characters in literature, simply because we all, as readers, love to hate them. Villains are important in any work of literature not only for their own selves, but because the hero is only as good as the villain. In other words, no matter how fantastically three dimensional the hero of the work is, if the villain is just a two-dimensional bad guy, it is the hero who suffers. In the present paper, we would discuss one of the greatest villains in children's literature, whose very name petrifies the characters of the book—Lord Voldemort of J.K.Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Voldemort is not just a two or three, but a multidimensional character and is as responsible for the success of the series as Harry Potter himself.

While analysing any character as a villain, it is impossible to ignore his or her genealogy as well as the environment in which he or she is brought up. The “baddies”, even as children, show certain distinct traits which characterise their villainy and dictatorship in their adult life. For example, it is believed that Hitler hated the Jews because he considered them responsible for the ineradicable stigma of poverty and abuse of which his entire childhood and adulthood had been a victim of. After all, nobody is born a hero or a villain; it is simply that some lose the key to the rose garden somewhere in the maze of life.

In her *Harry Potter* series, Rowling has created her own concept of a dictator and a tyrant through the character of Lord Voldemort. By providing an in-depth analysis of the regime of Voldemort's dictatorship, Rowling is able to give us a snapshot into the minds of power-hungry dictators and their ruthless techniques of achieving their goals, by hook or by crook.

Voldemort, like Adolf Hitler, had developed abilities of persuasion and manipulation during his very childhood and had perfected it in his adulthood. For example, it is said that as a child, Hitler had a knack of manipulating his mother into pampering him. Similarly, Voldemort too was able to manipulate and change his attitude to best suit the situation he was in and to coax or force others to give him what he wanted. The child Riddle, as we see in “*Harry Potter and the half Blood Prince*” had been behaving with Professor Dumbledore in a remarkably rude fashion, ordering him to “Tell the truth!”⁶ (p.252) and “Prove it [that Dumbledore was a wizard]”⁶ (p.254) because he was under the impression that Dumbledore was a doctor who had come to take him away into an asylum, but the moment he comes to know that it is through Dumbledore that he could escape the Dickensian orphanage in which he was living and be trained in magic at Hogwarts, we notice a remarkable change in his attitude towards the person to whom he had talked, a few minutes ago “with a ringing force that...sounded as though he had given it[commands] many times before.”⁶ (p.252), because by then he had understood that Dumbledore was not a person he could scare:

“I’m sorry, sir. I meant—please, Professor, could you show me---?”⁶(p.254)

As he himself aptly analyses his character in the second book of the series, “*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*” (p.228)

“If I say it myself, Harry, I’ve always been able to charm the people I needed.” This talent, present in greater or lesser amounts in every dictator, proves highly useful in his achievement of power and turning into a tyrant. Duly, at the age of twenty-two, Hitler had used this very talent to persuade a crippled aunt to give him a large sum of money and to leave him the bulk of her savings. Voldemort, at approximately the same age, convinced an old woman named Hepzibah Smith to show him Helga Hufflepuff’s cup, which he needed to make a Horcrux. A brief analysis of the scene which occurs in “*Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*” makes clear why Voldemort, in spite of working as just an ordinary assistant at Borgin and Burkes, a shop which specialised in “unusual and powerful properties” “was sent to persuade people to part with their treasures for sale by the partners, and he was, by all accounts, unusually gifted at doing this”⁶ (p.405). Immediately on entering Hepzibah’s house, where he had been sent by Mr. Burke to persuade her to sell her goblin made armour he “bowed low over Hepzibah’s fat little hand, brushing it with his lips.

‘I brought you flowers,’ he said quietly, producing a bunch of roses from nowhere.”

His answer to Hepzibah’s question whether he would like to see her “finest treasure”, which she had not even shown his master Mr. Burke proves the extent to which he had perfected flattery almost to the level of an art, used to attain his ends---“I’d be glad to see anything Miss Hepzibah shows me.”⁶ (p.405)

It is the same art of flattery and manipulation that he had earlier, when still at school, used to coax information out of Helena Ravenclaw about the location of the diadem or about the Horcruxes out of Professor Slughorn:

“But you obviously know all about them [Horcruxes], sir? I mean a wizard like you--- sorry, I mean, if you can’t tell me, obviously---I just knew if anyone could tell me, you could---so I just thought I’d ask----”(Half Blood Prince p.464)

As Harry notes, his “hesitancy, the casual tone, the careful flattery, none of it overdone” already shows the ambitious teenager Dark Lord in the making. At Hogwarts he rose to the position of a Prefect and the Head Boy. He had managed to charm every single teacher other than Albus Dumbledore. Yet, he knew that there would be certain situations where flattery would not work and he was more than ready to take recourse to force and his vindictive and ruthless nature had been amply reflected in his early years at the orphanage, prior to his joining Hogwarts. As Mrs. Cole, the matron of the orphanage where Tom was born and brought up as a child points out:

“He scares the other children...I think he must be [a bully]... but it’s very hard to catch him at it. There have been incidents...nasty things...”⁶(p.250)

The wildness and brutality that flowed in Riddle’s vein, which would manifest itself in near future (and cause witches and wizards to shudder to call him by his real name and refer to him as either “You-Know-Who” or “He Who Must Not be Named” or “The Dark Lord”, even in the first three books of the series, where he is barely more than dead) becomes amply clear from the fact that he had had an argument with a fellow resident of the orphanage Billy Stubb one day and the very next day Billy Stubb’s pet rabbit was found dead, hanging from the rafters, although Tom Riddle denied having done anything to it. This willingness to derive pleasure by hurting others only increased as Voldemort grew older, though he was clever enough not to unleash his urge until he was safely out of Hogwarts, and out of the watchful eyes of Albus Dumbledore.

There is undoubtedly something sadistic and sinister in the confession of the eleven year old, who had just come to know that he was a wizard:

“...I can make bad things happen to people who annoy me. I can make them hurt if I want to.”⁶ (p.254)

We, as readers can sufficiently deduce that it was exactly what he had done to his fellow inmates Amy Benson and Dennis Bishop who had “gone into a cave with Tom Riddle” and as Mrs. Cole points out that something happened there due to which, the children could never return to normalcy again. Yet what that “something” was, nobody could ever find out, just like many other things about Tom Riddle. Tom Riddle, like most other villains, preferred to maintain an aura of secrecy around him. Voldemort, even as a child had shown remarkable independence, because a common trait of dictators is that they are able to trust anyone. As an eleven year old, when told that he would be accompanied to purchase his school things in Diagon Alley, Voldemort’s immediate response is “I don’t need you. I’m used to doing things for myself, I go around London on my own all the time.”⁶(p 361) If we look at his time at Hogwarts, we find that in spite of having known how powerfully magical he was and that he was using his time at Hogwarts to make himself even more powerful, he didn't let everybody know what he was capable of. He undoubtedly gathered a number of followers even in his school years, because none can deny that he was charismatic, yet as Dumbledore rightly points out “Riddle undoubtedly felt no affection for any of them.”⁶(p 361) He was merely using them as building blocks in his mansion of power. As an adult too, he deliberately detaches himself from the help of other people and socialized only as a means of control. He had never confided in anyone the existence of his Horcruxes, he could trust no one to help him solve the mystery of why Harry’s wand countered his so effectively, not even

his faithful and most devoted followers and when he feared that his Horcruxes were in danger, he checked the status of each effectively. It almost exceeds the limits of credibility that as an underage boy Voldemort revenged himself on his father for having abandoned his mother was expecting him by killing his father and his entire family and thereafter arranging the proofs in such a way that his maternal grandfather was arrested for it and no one suspected him! When he left his work at Borgin and Burkes, no one had any inkling of what he was up to. When the first war began and the veil of secrecy around him had been lifted, it was already too late for even the most powerful of witches and wizards to do anything about him.

Actually, the regime of the Death Eaters led by Voldemort bears remarkable similarity with the fascist Nazi regime led by Lord Voldemort. The Nazis had professed their aim to create a single, superior Aryan race by killing the people belonging to all the other races that they had felt to be inferior and this becomes almost synonymous to the goal of the Death-Eaters themselves. Their agenda had been to rid the world of magical Britain of all Muggles and half-bloods so that the only remaining race to rule would be the pure-bloods. Adolf Hitler had started as a political activist who had initially used his charismatic personality, powerful oratory and the power of persuasion to gain support and eventually take over the Government. Similarly, in his agenda of purification of the magical community, Voldemort too had, in the initial stages, been met with massive mass support, because he, very shrewdly, was utilising the pride of being high-born of certain families, like that of the Blacks. This continued till these very people began to see through Voldemort's cruel and barbarous nature, but by then it was too late. They had already, unknowingly, provided Voldemort with the much needed foundation block of his mansion of power:

“...they [Sirius' parents] thought Voldemort had the right idea, they were all for the purification of the wizarding race, getting rid of Muggle-borns and having pure bloods in charge. They weren't alone, either, there were quite a few people before Voldemort showed his true colours, who thought he had the right idea about things...they got cold feet when they saw what he was prepared to do to get power, though.”⁵(p.104)

The Holocaust bears an uncanny resemblance to the mass-slaughter that was unleashed by the Death-Eaters on Voldemort's orders. The Nazis used a systematic way of killing off all the Jews, much like the fate meted out by the Death-Eaters to the Muggles and half-bloods. It would not be beside the point to recollect here the pamphlets that were distributed from the Ministry of Magic after it had been taken over by the Death-Eaters, which bore the heading:

“MUDBLOODS and the Dangers They Pose to a Peaceful Pure-Blood Society”
(p.205)

The trials of the non-pure Bloods, described in the last book of the series, to determine their blood-status also throws sufficient light on the similarity of the situation of magical Britain under the Death Eaters to Nazi Germany:

“The petrified Muggle-borns brought in for questioning sat huddled and shivering on hard wooden benches. Most of them were hiding their faces in their hands... some were accompanied by families, others sat alone.”⁷ (p. 212)

In fact, Hitler and Lord Voldemort had more in common than becomes apparent to the common eye. Other than being tyrannical dictators, they had both victimised the classes to which they themselves probably belonged. Hitler had tried to eliminate the Jews, yet it remains a topic long debated whether Hitler was himself not part-Jewish. Again, Voldemort had tried to rid the magical community of Muggles and half-bloods, in spite of the fact that he himself was half-blood, since his father had been a Muggle. As Erin Vollmer points out in her essay “*Harry’s World: An Exploration of J.K.Rowling’s Social and Political Agenda in the Harry Potter Series*”---“ ...It is ...possible that Voldemort uses the murder of his Muggle family as his way of ‘buying’ status in a pure-blood society, viewing blood sacrifices as his payment.... Voldemort further acknowledges the necessity of his father’s death, saying ‘...and I killed my father, and see how useful he has proved himself, in death...’. That is , Voldemort murdered his father and [paternal] grandparents; therefore he has relinquished his Muggle blood through their deaths. As a proof of his new status, Tom Riddle sheds his name and utilizes the pseudonym Lord Voldemort, solidifying his status among pure-blood wizards.”⁸ Yet the fact that he could never rid himself of his half-blood legacy is amply proved by the prophecy of Sybill Trelawney, which spoke of a boy child “*born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark lord will mark him as his equal.*”⁵ (p 741) The prophecy could have referred to either Harry Potter or Neville Longbottom, yet Voldemort himself chose as his adversary Harry and not Neville, as Dumbledore very rightly points out “he chose, not the pure-blood (which, according to his creed, is the only kind of wizard worth being or knowing) but the half-blood, like himself.”, thus proving beyond doubt that no matter how much he tried, Voldemort could never rid himself from the inferiority complex of being a half blood.

Persistently, throughout his life, Voldemort had been driven by a desire for power and immortality, but in the process had left behind what he, or for that matter, any other human being needed the most. He wants and obtains great power over others, who are motivated either by a fear of his dark magic or fascinated by the promises of power and glory that

submission to him promised. The task of killing Dumbledore that Voldemort had assigned to Draco had an accompanying condition, which Draco himself points out: “He told me to do it or he’ll kill me. I’ve got no choice.”⁶ (p. 553) In the Graveyard scene in “*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*”, Peter Pettigrew on being rewarded with his silver hand whispers:

“‘My Lord,’ he whispered, ‘Master...it is beautiful...thank you... thank you...’ He scrambled forward on his knees and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robes.”

Even his most fanatic adherent, Bellatrix Lestrange, fears him and craves him and craves his regard for her powers and loyalty, but none of his Death Eaters like him or love him. They are opportunists who follow him either to save their skins or in search of an advantage for themselves and Voldemort, too, was simply using them to attain his own ends, which is proved by the ease with which he killed Snape just to attain the Elder Wand. Sirius Black aptly sums up the relationship between Voldemort and his followers in the words:

“Well, you don’t just hand in your resignation to Voldemort. It’s a lifetime of service or death.”⁵ (p.104)

The fate of Igor Karkaroff, as reported by Remus Lupin, after the former had deserted the Death-Eaters also proves the truth of Sirius’s words beyond doubt:

“And they’ve found Igor Karkaroff’s body in a shack up north. The Dark Mark had been set over it---well, frankly, I’m surprised he stayed alive for even a year after deserting the Death Eaters; Sirius’s brother Regulus only managed a few days as far as I can remember.”⁶ (p.102)

Even as a child, while playing nasty sadistic tricks on his fellow inmates of the orphanage, Voldemort had never attempted to befriend them or manipulate or bewitch them into loving him, at any point of time. It is surprising that Voldemort who, after having been born out of a one sided infatuation and abandoned by his father even before he was born and thereafter having grown up in an orphanage, never seems too eager in his adult life to seek the love he had never had as child. People often aim in their life to attain something of which they had been deprived of as a child and a child brought up in a loveless environment often attempts to seek or even to create an environment of love wherever he or she goes, as happened in the case of Harry Potter Voldemort’s life, on the other hand, was based on a single-point agenda—to achieve the highest throne of the wizarding world from where he would be able to control others and where he would be feared (not loved) by all and to wage a never-ending battle over the principle of good.

This departure from the love seeking quest of the unloved can be attributed to the hereditary ruthlessness and superiority complex regarding the purity of his blood (in spite of

being a half-blood) that he had inherited from his maternal uncle and his grandfather. Hatred ran in the veins of the Gaunt family and this becomes amply evident in his grandfather Marvolo's treatment of his own daughter Merope whom he regularly abused physically and verbally and was on the verge of strangling to death for the "crime" of having fallen in love with "a filthy, dirt-veined Muggle" in spite of being the "pureblooded descendent of Salazar Slytherin." Morfin, Voldemort's maternal uncle, who already had a record of Muggle attacks, had, without any provocation, attacked the man whom Merope had fallen in love with and had hexed him causing bee-hives to develop all over him and this had caused his father to be extremely proud of him because "Morfin gave a Muggle a bit of what was coming to him...He taught a filthy muggle a lesson." Marvolo Gaunt had himself attacked Ogden, an official from the Ministry of Magic with a bloody knife simply for the offence of having tried to protect his [Marvolo's] daughter from being strangled by her father.

The Gaunt family, stunning by its depravity and brutality had provided Voldemort with an aptitude for and a heritage of dark arts and motives which he discovered as much as learned or invented.

But even before Voldemort had attacked the Potters at Godric's Hollow, he had had no interest in food, drink, friendship or even sex—any affiliation or constructive achievement, which for better or worse, are an integral part of human life. He was governed solely by a hunger for death and destruction and a thirst for vengeance against anyone he believed to have thwarted him. After having killed Lily and James Potter, there had been no proper reason for him to have attempted to kill their infant son. But by then, Voldemort was beyond anybody's control, even his own and as Hagrid points out in "*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*":

"...maybe he just liked killin' by then" (p.45)

It would not, therefore, be far fetched to think of Voldemort as an alternative incarnation of Thanatos, the personification of death common in classical Greek drama and a concept which Freud popularised as a death instinct, a Freudian conceptualization of an urge towards dissolution and death.

In such a joyless, lifeless and almost animal-like existence of Voldemort we can spot not just evil, but , to use a term from Gerald Manley Hopkins, an inscape of Milton's understanding of hell, the place and condition which evil treats as home--- "Which way I fly in Hell; myself am Hell".

Such a depiction of Voldemort enables us to understand a particular strand of Western philosophy about evil. From Plato through the Neo-Platonists to Jesus' anguished cry on the

cross, evil is always associated with a sense of ignorance, a lack of ignorance---“Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Voldemort’s ultimate defeat and destruction too can be attributed to his lack of knowledge of an important and extremely powerful human faculty—love. As Dumbledore points out in “*Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*”:

“If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love.” (p.216)

He had no idea of the power of primordial matriarchal powers when he had attempted to murder the infant Harry but was foiled by a mother’s self-less sacrifice for her child. It is therefore, no wonder that Riddle considers the grapes sour and makes it a point to ridicule “love” at every chance he got. (“Is it love again...Dumbledore’s favourite solution, love...” “*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* p. 592). It is interesting to note in this context that in Voldemort’s long lifespan of approximately seventy years, he remains the only other major character in the book apart from Sirius Black, who is never shown to have had any kind of romantic attachment for any human being. But whereas, in Sirius’ case, we find ample instances of his having involved himself in many self-made positive relationships like friendship and brotherhood, Voldemort deliberately keeps himself aloof from any kind of relationship. It has been speculated in a rather far-fetched way that Bellatrix Lestrange’s undying devotion may have been a sign that subconsciously she had harboured romantic notions for Tom Riddle, Voldemort’s relationship with her was, what in modern corporate terminology can be called, “strictly professional”. He saw her simply as an immensely powerful witch who was greatly devoted to him and his cause and the narration of Voldemort’s reaction to her death confirms the truth of this:

“[Harry] saw McGonagall, Kinsley, and Slughorn blasted backward, flailing and writhing through the air, as Voldemort’s fury at the fall of his last, best lieutenant exploded with the force of a bomb” (Hallows 737) Thus Rowling has left us in no doubt that Voldemort cared about Lestrange only as far as her magical abilities were concerned, not for any kind of love or personal relationship. In reply to Tom Riddle’s claim that he had “pushed the boundaries of magic further, perhaps, than they have ever been pushed”, Dumbledore highlights Riddle’s ignorance of love with the words “Of some kinds of magic...of others, you remain...forgive me...woefully ignorant” (“*Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*” p.415). Dumbledore’s regret as a teacher at his own ex-student Tom Riddle having gone, as Hagrid says, “bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse.”(p.45) becomes crystal clear in his parting words to Riddle:

“The time is long gone when I could frighten you with a burning wardrobe and force you to make repayment for your crimes. But I wish I could, Tom...I wish I could.”

Like Dumbledore, Harry too had offered Tom Riddle the choice of a better life in the words:

“...I’d advise you to think about what you’ve done...think, and try for some remorse Riddle.” (p.594)

But Voldemort seems impervious to any attempt at redemption through remorse. Being ignorant of the light of the knowledge of the good, he rejects it as a choice, not once, but repeatedly. Already burning in his self-engineered hell, he had extinguished within himself the understanding and the capacity that would enable a choice. He therefore, never makes an attempt to escape his fate because he never had had any ability to distinguish good from evil.

It is in rejecting all the opportunities that Voldemort is offered of redemption and starting his life afresh, as Snape had once done, that the former ends up as an inconsolable, infinitely suffering splinter of his former self, in a private hell that he had artistically constructed for himself. As Dumbledore explains to Harry in King’s Cross Railway Station, Voldemort’s soul splinters (pictured as something like a writhing abandoned baby) are beyond help, to be left, like Satan, to eternal unbounded agony. It is not that Voldemort “lacked” knowledge, but he “forgot” or more appropriately, purposely rejected it. His moral short-sightedness resulted, at least partly, from a failure to value morality, faithfulness, loyalty, friendship or any kind of positive attachment whatsoever, the only relationship that he acknowledged was that of enmity.

When the magical Sorting Hat was placed on Harry’s head to determine to which House and consequently he shall belong, Harry, like Becket in Eliot’s *“Murder in the Cathedral”* rejects all traps and temptations of material rewards and earthly superiority which the Slytherin House promised to offer and chooses life as a Gryffindor---a path of morally intact bravery. As Dumbledore explains to Harry “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.” (p.245) Like Harry and Snape, Voldemort too had been offered choices, but to him good was simply an absurdity, a burden. For him, everything was a means of attaining his ill-guided purpose of divine immortality for himself. He had purposely transformed (or rather deformed) himself into a demon and it is no wonder that he lived and died alone and in shame. In the constructed theatre of battles between embodiments of good and evil results the dramatically convincing destruction of a man who had attempted to be God. It is through the character of Tom Marvolo Riddle or Lord Voldemort that the Harry Potter series becomes much more than just a work of children’s fiction, it becomes a saga of human life that touches us and burns us.

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