

“Neither Can Live While the Other Survives”: The Driving Force of Revenge in *Harry Potter*

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1. “The Boy Who Lived”: An Unlikely Revenger

Since the 1990s, J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series has grown from a scribble on a napkin to a world-wide cultural phenomenon. The books have caused people to line up outside of bookstores hours, even days, before their release, and have led to a billion-dollar movie franchise. But what makes the story so enticing? What made the series grow from yet another Young Adult fantasy series to a world-wide phenomenon, even, some would say, an obsession? Some will argue that it is Rowling’s creativity, her incredible talent for world-building. Others claim that it is the archetypal struggle between good and evil. While I don’t discount either of these arguments, I argue that the real driving force behind the series, and its success, is revenge. There are few less likely revengers than Harry Potter—a shy, quiet eleven-year-old boy who, when we first meet him, wants nothing more than a friend. However, just as the books move from childhood to reluctant adulthood, and the plot becomes more twisted, Harry changes from innocent to revenger. Like Shakespeare’s character Hamlet, the revenge tragedy genre’s most well-known face, Harry is reluctant to adopt this role for most of the seven-volume series. Ultimately, though, Harry not only acts as a revenger, but also struggles with the same complex dilemmas central to Renaissance drama—the loss of family, the loss of self, and the struggle for agency.

2. Rowling and the Revenge Tragedy Genre

Revenge is the driving force of the *Harry Potter* series. Like every revenge tragedy in the genre’s canon, the series is framed by two defining events: the initial crime and the final, bloody battle. The series begins on the night that Harry’s parents are murdered, and ends sixteen years later with the “Battle of Hogwarts” (*DH* p. 608). The initial murder is characteristic of revenge tragedies as it involves a close family member. For instance, in *Hamlet*, the revenger’s father is also killed. Hamlet is literally haunted by his father’s death and, throughout the play, is torn between wanting to revenge his father and simply wanting to remember him. Harry, whose parents and loved ones are all killed, struggles with the same decision throughout the novels.

Early on in the series, Rowling characterizes Harry in a way that predisposes him to become a revenger. A highlight among nearly all revengers in the genre's canon is a value system that places a high premium on family honor, chivalry, and heroism. It is a societal value, but also a personality trait that revengers share, and seems to predispose them to become revengers. For instance, in *The Spanish Tragedy*, the play's main revenger Hieronimo feels honor-bound to revenge the murder of his son Horatio. When he is slow to take revenge, he berates himself: "see, see, oh, see thy shame, Hieronimo . . . to neglect the swift revenge of thy Horatio."¹ The shame that Hieronimo feels for neglecting revenge reveals a personal and societal value system laden with familial honor, duty, and heroism. Though young, Harry shares this value system, and this predisposes him to become a revenger. During the Hogwarts sorting ceremony, the Sorting Hat debates between putting Harry into Slytherin, whose members are described as "cunning" people who will "use any means to achieve their ends," or Gryffindor, whose "daring, nerve, and chivalry set [them] apart" (*SS* p. 118). Against the Sorting Hat's advice, Harry chooses to be in Gryffindor and reveals his heroic moral code (*SS* p. 125). As the series progresses, Harry is further revealed to have a "weakness for heroics," which Voldemort eventually exploits (*OotP* p. 782). The importance that Harry places on heroism, honor, and chivalry causes him to feel honor-bound to revenge his parents' deaths, and thus predisposes him to become a revenger.

Like the most famous revenger, Hamlet, Harry is slow to accept the path of revenge. The first five books of the saga seem to lead to this choice. Like a typical revenger, Harry feels frustrated that redress through the established legal system is impossible because the perpetrator, Voldemort, is in a position of overwhelming power. In *Order of the Phoenix*, Harry is unable to go through the traditional legal channels at the Ministry of Magic, because the Ministry represses the knowledge that Voldemort has returned, and even terrorizes Harry for saying otherwise (*OotP* p. 245). Once the Ministry admits the fact of Voldemort's return, it is a short time before the Ministry itself is taken over by Voldemort and his followers (*DH* p. 159). Voldemort's power, combined with the Ministry's lack of cooperation and then corruption, make it impossible for Harry to go through the established legal system, leaving "lawless" revenge as his only option for redress.

Meanwhile, there is tremendous psychological and social pressure on Harry to take revenge. Harry collects mementos, which remind him of his need for revenge, most prominently "the locket with the note signed R.A.B.," which reminds him of Dumbledore's death, and the shard of a mirror that was once Sirius Black's (his late godfather) (*DH* p. 15). John Kerrigan discusses such mementos in *Revenge Tragedy*, describing how revengers, specifically Hieronimo of *The Spanish Tragedy*, "[set] out to secure retribution by

¹ Thomas Kyd, "The Spanish Tragedy," in *Four Revenge Tragedies*, ed. Katharine Eisaman Maus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 2-91, quotation at p. 65.

equipping [themselves] with objects charged with remembrance.”² These *memento mori* remind the revenger and the audience of the crime, and constantly prompt the revenger toward vengeance. In addition to the psychological pressure to seek revenge created by the *memento mori*, Harry also faces extreme social pressure, most notably in the last two books. The wizarding community comes to think that Harry is “‘The Chosen One,’ . . . the only one who will be able to rid [them] of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named” (*HBP* p. 39). Because of this belief, the entire wizarding community pressures Harry into action. Harry is faced with the revenger’s most common dilemma: a feeling of being honor-bound to seek revenge, but knowing that doing so will go against society’s established rules.

Though all of the books are driven by revenge, Harry doesn’t become a revenger until the end of the sixth book, *Half-Blood Prince*. Kerrigan describes how “the revenger . . . suspends his own identity” when he decides to seek revenge.³ Harry, likewise, suspends his identity when he finally accepts the role of the revenger. The first step on this path is Harry’s conscious choice to remain in the Wizarding World. After Sirius Black’s death, Harry tells himself that he “can’t shut [himself] away or—or crack up” (*HBP* p. 77). He realizes he can’t escape his duty to revenge by living with the Dursleys in the Muggle World. Harry seems to be aware that, in order to become a revenger, he can no longer be “normal”; he can no longer be himself. At Dumbledore’s funeral, Harry makes the final decision to begin “hunting Voldemort” alone, and becomes a true revenger (*HBP* p. 647). He decides to end his relationship with Ginny Weasley, referring to their brief relationship as “something out of someone else’s life” because of its normalcy (*HBP* p. 646). He realizes that, once he takes on the role of revenger, he can no longer lead a normal, teenage life, and can no longer totally be himself.

Once Harry accepts this role, he also fulfills a traditional characteristic of the revenger: he loses his moral code. In the *Harry Potter* series, there are three Unforgivable Curses, outlined in *Goblet of Fire*: the Imperius Curse, used to control an individual against his or her will, the Cruciatius Curse, used to torture, and Avada Kedavra, the killing curse. After taking on the role of the revenger, Harry uses both the Imperius and the Cruciatius Curses, reluctantly at first, but eventually to great effect. In *Order of the Phoenix*, Harry first attempts to use the Cruciatius Curse on Bellatrix Lestrange after she kills his godfather, Sirius. However, he is unable to, because, as Bellatrix points out to him mockingly, “[the user needs] to *mean* them, . . . to really want to cause pain—to enjoy it” (*OotP* p. 810). His “righteous anger” is ineffective; he has not yet lost his moral code and become a revenger, and thus cannot properly perform the Unforgivable spells (*OotP* p. 810). After becoming a true revenger, however, he uses both the Imperius

² John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 174.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Curse and the Cruciatus Curse in *Deathly Hallows*. Harry uses the Imperius Curse first, putting two individuals under the curse while he, Ron, Hermione, and Griphook infiltrate Gringotts Bank. Upon realizing that the goblins know that Hermione is an imposter, Harry puts a goblin under the Imperius Curse. Harry is hesitant to perform the spell and only does so when he knows that they are in imminent danger. The second time, however, Harry “[acts] without thinking,” and places Travers under the Imperius Curse as well (*DH* p. 531). This reveals that Harry begins to lose his moral code after performing an Unforgivable Curse. At first, he is hesitant to perform the curse and listens to multiple warnings from Griphook before acting. After first using the Imperius Curse, it becomes easier for Harry to perform the Unforgivable Curse, and he can even place an individual under this spell without thinking. After performing the Imperius Curse, Harry soon becomes able to perform the Cruciatus Curse, further revealing the loss of his moral code. In the *Deathly Hallows* chapter “The Sacking of Severus Snape,” Harry uses the Cruciatus Curse on Amycus Carrow after Carrow spits on Professor McGonagall. He uses the curse so effectively that Carrow is “lifted off his feet . . . , smashed into the front of a bookcase and crumple[s], insensible, to the floor” (*DH* p. 593). Harry’s ability to use the Unforgivable Curses effectively reveals the loss of his moral code.

3. “All the Difference in the World”: Harry’s Struggle for Agency

The central conflict of many of the revenge tragedies in the literary canon is the revenger’s struggle to attain agency. The revenger is faced with a fundamental paradox. Because of the initial crime, and the fact that there is no course of redress through typical legal channels, the revenger is forced into a difficult position. While he gains agency by choosing to take revenge and redress the wrong inflicted on him by the perpetrator, in doing so he loses agency by falling into a role that is prescribed for him by others (that is, society, the personification of Revenge, etc.). Kerrigan discusses this paradox in relation to *The Spanish Tragedy*: “In one way, [Hieronimo] is compelled to travel towards Revenge, for the goddess of his play, Proserpine, has granted Andrea a providential as well as a judgmental ‘doom,’ and Hieronimo is the instrument of her will. But in another sense he actively chooses to make the journey.”⁴ Here, Kerrigan highlights the central struggle for agency that revengers face. *The Spanish Tragedy*’s revenger, Hieronimo, is a brilliant illustration of this paradox. Throughout the play, the personification of Revenge controls the events that take place.⁵ From the beginning of the play when the ghost of Don Andrea, whose death begins the chain of events that leads Hieronimo to revenge, meets Hades’s wife Proserpine to assign Andrea his “doom” and subsequently summons Revenge, there is a strong sense that

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁵ Kyd, “The Spanish Tragedy,” in *Four Revenge Tragedies*, ed. Eisaman Maus, p. 5.

Hieronimo's revenge is fated by the gods.⁶ Even when he chooses to revenge his son's death, his actions are scripted by the personification of Revenge, which strips Hieronimo of agency, and thus reveals the unique and maddening struggle of all revengers: while he seems to gain agency by choosing to revenge, he also loses agency by falling into the scripted role of a revenger.

This paradox is also central to the *Harry Potter* series. Like Hieronimo, Harry's fate to become a revenger and to kill Voldemort seems to be destined in Sybill Trelawney's prophecy: "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. . . . Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies . . . and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not . . . and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives" (*OotP* p. 841). Because of the prophecy, Harry seems fated to become a revenger. Because Voldemort chose to "mark" Harry as his equal by attempting to kill him, Harry is inextricably tied to Voldemort. There is a strong sense in the final three books that Harry is doomed to face Voldemort, that he is "The Chosen One." This stems both from the prophecy and from Harry's own personification of Revenge, which comes to script his actions. At the same time, however, Harry is also able to "choose" to become a revenger, to pursue Voldemort. In a pivotal discussion with Harry, Dumbledore struggles to make Harry understand the fundamental paradox that he faces—that Harry can simultaneously choose to become a revenger and be destined to revenge. When Harry protests, saying "it all comes to the same thing," that Harry has "got to try and kill him" either way, Dumbledore breaks in: "Got to? . . . Of course you've got to! But not because of the prophecy! Because you, yourself, will never rest until you've tried! We both know it!" (*HBP* p. 511). Here, Rowling introduces the revenger's struggle for agency, the central paradox that revengers face, and tries to help the reader come to terms with it. Perhaps more than other revenge tragedies, Rowling attempts to solve this paradox, allowing Harry both to choose and to be destined to revenge.

But Harry's struggle for agency doesn't end with his choice to become a revenger; once Harry makes his choice, he struggles against the scripted role that Dumbledore, who acts as the personification of Revenge in the *Harry Potter* series, creates for him. Harry's revenge and eventual killing of Voldemort is planned and controlled. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, the personification of Revenge is the one pulling the strings. As the play progresses, Revenge and the ghost of Don Andrea sit on the sidelines and watch the events that lead to the revenge of Don Andrea's death. At one point, Revenge falls asleep, and Don Andrea forces him awake, worried that nothing is being done to avenge his death because of Revenge's lack of attention. However, Revenge replies that "though I sleep, yet is my mood soliciting their souls."⁷ After this, he shows Andrea a "dumb show," which reveals the events

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 73.

to come: a bloody wedding and the completion of Andrea's revenge.⁸ The personification of Revenge controls all of the events of the play, even while he is not present in the action, or even conscious.

In *Harry Potter*, the figure of Dumbledore acts in a similar way. Particularly after his death in *Half-Blood Prince*, Dumbledore scripts all of Harry's actions. Much of *Deathly Hallows* involves Harry attempting to puzzle out the clues Dumbledore has left for him, Ron, and Hermione in order to defeat Voldemort. Though Dumbledore appears to be absent, Harry finds that Dumbledore has carefully planned the death of Voldemort. After Dumbledore's physical death, "the portrait of Dumbledore" is able to continue to orchestrate Harry's revenge with the help of Severus Snape (*DH* p. 689). In Snape's memories, Dumbledore instructs Snape in each step of Harry's revenge, telling him how and when to hide the sword, scripting Harry's actions so that he constantly feels as if he is unraveling a code, a riddle left for him by Dumbledore (*DH* p. 689). Similar to other revengers, Harry goes back and forth between accepting the scripted role created for him by Dumbledore and wanting to rebel against it. As he watches Ron and Hermione on one occasion, Harry realizes that they "could walk away if they wanted to [while Harry] could not" (*DH* 278). He feels especially resentful toward, and even betrayed by, Dumbledore when he discovers in *Deathly Hallows* that Dumbledore's plan for Harry's revenge inevitably leads to Harry's death (*DH* chap. 34). Still, however, Harry accepts his fate. Harry knows that he must not only move toward Voldemort's end, but also to "his [own] end" (*DH* p. 693).

4. "A Power Beyond the Reach of Any Magic": The Subversion of the Revenge Tragedy Genre

Until this point, Rowling follows the model of a revenge tragedy closely, allowing young readers to grapple with the complex themes of agency and morality. However, in "The Forest Again" chapter of *Deathly Hallows*, Rowling begins ever so slightly to subvert the genre. Like many revengers, Harry accepts his own death as part of the cycle of revenge. Both the revenger and the perpetrator must die in order to expunge society of the chaos and disorder that their conflict causes. Harry resigns himself to this fact after realizing that he is the last Horcrux, meaning that part of Voldemort's fragmented soul resides within Harry's body. He must die in order for Voldemort ever to be killed and revenge to be achieved. After resigning himself to this fact, he walks to meet his death—a kind of suicide—and Voldemort "kills" him.

However, all Voldemort manages to kill is the fragmented piece of Voldemort's soul which resides within Harry, making Harry's soul "whole, and completely [his] own" (*DH* p. 708). Therefore, Voldemort expunges the chaotic and disorderly part of Harry's soul, allowing the "complete," non-

⁸ Ibid.

revenger Harry to continue to live without disturbing society. Voldemort, however, is not so lucky. Following the tradition of the revenge tragedy, Voldemort is killed. However, he is not killed by the new, “complete” Harry, but by Voldemort’s “own rebounding curse” (*DH* p. 744).

Rowling’s subversion of the genre here is jarring. She modifies the revenge tragedy genre to allow her revenger to live normally in society. Harry achieves his revenge and manages to eliminate Voldemort, but only through a willingness to engage in self-sacrifice. By deviating from the genre at the final moment, allowing Harry to survive through love, Rowling suggests that love and revenge—two seemingly polar forces—may be intertwined to eliminate evil.

At the end of the saga, the reader is relieved that Voldemort has been killed and that society has been expunged. But at the same time, Rowling’s jarring subversion of the revenge tragedy genre leaves the reader somewhat stunned and dissatisfied. The series ends with an epilogue, showing the main characters nineteen years later. Without Voldemort, normalcy has returned; however, Harry is no longer an exciting character. His characteristic scar has “not pained [him] for nineteen years” (*DH* p. 759). The reader’s dissatisfaction with the normalcy of the ending connects *Harry Potter* even more to the revenge tragedy genre, because it reveals the mixed repulsion and intense attraction that humans feel toward revenge.

5. Conclusion

Harry not only operates as a revenger, but deals with the complex dilemma of agency and identity that troubled playwrights during the Renaissance. The fact that the series operates as a revenge tragedy raises the uncomfortable question: why a revenge tragedy for children? In the *Harry Potter* series, Rowling doesn’t shy away from the ugly, the hateful, and the painful. By making revenge a driving force in the series for both Harry and Voldemort, two opposing characters, Rowling powerfully illustrates to her young readers that people, and life, are imperfect. Furthermore, the fact that children are so wholly invested in the series, and compelled to continue reading until the final revenge is achieved, suggests that revenge is an innate, even involuntary, part of human nature. In the *Harry Potter* series, Rowling highlights an uncomfortable truth about human nature: that humans, of all ages, are at once horrified and enticed by revenge.

