

The Locked Room in the Department of Mysteries: Snarry in Canon

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Snarry in Canon

Chapter 1 of 1

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Introduction

One crucial relationship drives all seven books of the *Harry Potter* series. Only when Severus Snape and Harry Potter resolve their mutual hatred and recognize the love in one another can Voldemort be defeated. Harry may be the Chosen One, and Snape may be the greatest Occlumens ever known, but neither can bring down Voldemort alone. Each man has something the other man needs. When the two of them see each other clearly and fuse their formidable powers to work together, this partnership forms the key to the story. It's this transformative understanding that generates enough magic to open the locked room in the Department of Mysteries, the one that contains the force more wonderful and terrible than death.

This is not to argue that Snape and Harry do or don't belong together as a romantic couple. Like any other fanfiction pairing, "Snarry" has its detractors; I don't address any of those objections here except to say, "Of *course* it's okay to imagine them together." Here's what seems central to me: of the many relationships in J.K. Rowling's canon, the dynamic between Harry and Snape strikes closest to the nerve center of her story. Let's look at a few of the moments that have provided fuel for many fanfiction writers.

Philosopher's/Sorcerer's Stone

The first look between Snape and Harry was more memorable even than Harry's proximity to Voldemort: "The hook-nosed teacher looked past Quirrell's turban straight into Harry's eyes and a sharp, hot pain shot across the scar on Harry's forehead" [SS 126]. Harry retains three impressions from this first encounter:

- * This teacher looks unattractive.
- * Crossing paths with him will often involve pain.
- * And "a feeling that he didn't like Harry at all" [SS 126].

This feeling is a major trigger for the child who was orphaned by a stranger and then abused for the past ten years. How uneasy it must have felt to wonder of this strange

new teacher, *Why does he hate me? I have never done anything to him.*

During their first classroom interaction, he observes that Snape's eyes are "cold and empty and made you think of dark tunnels" [SS 136]. What a beautiful set-up from Rowling. We will see for seven books that every time Harry encounters a dark tunnel, he takes it. Unerringly, they lead him to secrets, treasures, and *answers*.

Snape launches his classroom habit of singling out Harry, unprovoked. He mocks Harry as "Our new *celebrity*" [SS 136]. This is monstrously unfair. What's going on?

Oh. Snape envies Harry his story and the recognition that comes with it.

The **first thing Rowling knew about Harry** was that other people knew his story, but he "didn't know he was a wizard until he got his invitation to wizard school." Hermione, the designated reader for the series, tells him on the train, "I know all about you, of course I got a few extra books for background reading[....] Goodness, didn't you know, I'd have found out everything I could if it was me" [SS 106].

Harry *had* tried his entire life to get his story from the Dursleys, who withheld it and punished him for asking. Harry, fighting Uncle Vernon for his Hogwarts letter, declares, "It's MINE!" He adds the heartbreaking argument: "it had my cupboard on it" [SS 37]. The cupboard, the neglect and abuse at the hands of his relations, is what he owns of his story. The Hogwarts letters fly through the cracks and down the chimney the way Harry's memories and feelings come unstoppably once they're started. As soon as Harry knows he's a wizard, oddities about himself begin to make sense, knitting together and integrating irresistibly like Voldemort's Horcrux fragments straining to reunite.

Along with his fury at the Dursleys for distorting James' and Lily's stories with shabby lies, along with his determination to hold on to every morsel of identity, Harry has the sense that something very large is beginning to be restored to him. When his Gringotts vault opens, he finds piles of treasure left for him by his parents. That had been there, all along. A wealth of story belonged to him, whether he could access it or not. Now that he knows, nothing can stop Harry's hunger to regain it.

And then, at the end of the first book, he learns that the teacher who hates him has a part of his story. His father had saved this man's life. He's protecting Harry at considerable cost to himself, and Dumbledore won't give Harry the reason. Rowling has established a crackling dynamic between Harry and Snape: Harry wants the vital parts of his own story that Snape knows. Snape is hiding something. And they loathe each other.

Chamber of Secrets

In Harry's second year, we meet someone so loathsome that Harry and Snape readily prefer one another to this loser. Gilderoy Lockhart is one of Rowling's purely evil characters; she gives him no redemption. He is the exact opposite of Snape in every way, all surface and no substance, and he's Harry's natural enemy: he exploits Harry for publicity as soon as they meet, and we find that he is a thief of other people's stories, a murderer of memories.

His thieving nature is convenient when Snape wants to teach the kids *Expelliarmus* during this divisive time when Muggle-borns are under attack. Snape must not be seen to teach Defense, so he suggests an extracurricular dueling club to Lockhart and lets nature take its course, tagging along subversively to slip in a proper lesson.

Why *Expelliarmus*? Snape sees his protégé Draco wishing death on "Mudbloods" and watches half-bloods like Harry and pure-bloods like Ron grapple with realizing that despite their privilege, their friendships with Muggle-borns will eventually require them to take sides, to take a stand or fail their friends. He cannot tell them what to think. He knows they are fighting. He knows that people under pressure blurt out things that may have catastrophic consequences. But this one thing, he can do. He can hardwire the kids with a pacifist defense so they don't hurt each other, drill them across the board with no comprehension required, and pray that someday, when feeling defensive, the first thing these kids blurt out whether facing each other, facing Voldemort, facing Dumbledore, facing the Elder Wand will be *Expelliarmus*. He knows he can get away with this in plain sight of the Death Eaters. Disarmament is a defense beneath Voldemort's notice and therefore something he can teach, undetected, to help bring Voldemort down.

We can almost hear Snape's thoughts intensify the moment he realizes Harry is a Parselmouth. He was "looking at Harry in an unexpected way: It was a shrewd and calculating look" [CoS 195]. It's the first Snape sees the degree to which Voldemort has infiltrated Harry's being. From then on, he knows that he's going to have to teach Harry what he has taught himself about letting the Dark Lord into his mind while appearing not to be shutting him out, retaining a private self in secret while using the connection to figure out where Voldemort is weak.

Among the many triumphs of Snape's *Expelliarmus* plan is that he pulls it off while remaining hidden. At the end of *Chamber of Secrets*, on the train home, the kids "practiced disarming each other by magic. Harry was getting very good at it" [CoS 340]. They have taken ownership of the spell, not rejecting it because of who taught it. It's Harry's first lesson to the DA; it becomes his signature magic. Snape has succeeded in transmitting to Harry and this leads directly to Voldemort's downfall.

Prisoner of Azkaban

Because the third year is awesome for Harry, it's crappy for Snape. Harry's father's friends give him stories about his father, an expensive broom, private lessons. Meanwhile, Snape watches in horror as Padfoot, Wormtail, and Moony join Prongs the Second to torment Snape again like some sick Gryffindor joke. Even before he knows that Wormtail is alive, we can see from his eyes flicking between Harry, Lupin [PoA 156], and Neville (who resembles Peter Pettigrew) [PoA 213] that Snape spends all year in acute flashback to the time when bullies tried to kill him.

His PTSD gives Snape a frantic quality when scolding Harry about not keeping himself safe from Sirius Black. He accuses Harry bitterly of considering himself above the rules: "Let the ordinary people worry about his safety!" [PoA 284]. Harry can't know, but Snape's feelings about Sirius Black are not so different from his own feelings about Voldemort.

While Snape is in flashback, though, Harry has parallel flashbacks of his own. His talks with Lupin yield precious stories about his father, but this nourishment makes him crave stories about his mother all the more. In his Patronus lessons, his intense memory work triggers an awful dilemma: he flashes back to his mother's murder, which is traumatic and exhausting. But he doesn't know if he wants to stop the flashbacks or let them take over. How can he stop longing to hear his mother's voice?

Love wins out. Harry amazes the whole school with his enormous stag Patronus. Harry also impresses Lupin and, as he later learns, Sirius, by playing Quidditch as well as his father did. We know what Snape had to say about that:

"A small amount of talent on the Quidditch field made him think he was a cut above the rest of us too. Strutting around the place...."

"My dad didn't *strut*," said Harry, before he could stop himself" [PoA 284].

Oh, dear. This tells Snape that Harry hasn't been given the whole story. Harry wants the story of James? Snape will give him his accursed story. Arrogant, bullying, blah blah blah. Remaining so hidden is a worse strain on Snape when he's in flashback. All the time that James was praised for flying, Snape and Lily kept quiet about their much greater magic. Now Harry is praised for his powerful stag and Snape can't show that his doe Patronus is every bit as pure. If you want to read the stag and the doe as evidence that they're a perfect match, I'm not going to stop you.

Harry isn't ready to understand Snape's flashbacks or how it feels to be an adult on his second chance, nor should he be, with all his own baggage. He's got Hermione for that. Mature Hermione with her Time-Turner experience knows all about looking at your past from a different perspective, not interfering, never being seen, just going back to learn something different this time. Returning to the site of trauma because shining a light on it from another angle can set an innocent person free.

"I knew I could do it this time," said Harry, "because I'd already done it.... Does that make sense?"

"I don't know Harry, look at Snape!"

Together they peered around the bush at the other bank. Snape had regained consciousness. He was conjuring stretchers and lifting the limp forms of Harry, Hermione, and Black onto them [PoA 412].

So this is what Snape does when he thinks no one can see him. He cares for students. He even cares for his worst enemy. This is the true picture of how he spends his second iteration. The Time-Turner gives you perspective, gives you just that much more maturity and understanding. It's no coincidence that these moments are juxtaposed, Harry learning the power of his own love and Harry getting a rare glimpse of the unoccluded Snape.

Goblet of Fire

Harry's life events and Snape's continue along parallel tracks in *Goblet of Fire*. Against a backdrop of adolescence and uncontrolled, monstrous bodily changes ferrets and half-sharks and Skrewts Harry is forced into life-threatening conflicts for which he is too young and Snape sees his Dark Mark grow clearer.

This theme of dreading the unknown adult future culminates masterfully in the nighttime confrontation between Moody, Filch, and nightshirt-clad Snape that Harry witnesses while invisible, one leg stuck in a trick stair. The paranoid, the impotent, the spy: this scene is a high convergence of Ugly, a veritable pageant of repellent white masculinity in the long tradition of British literary grotesques. The three men are caricatures drawn by trauma or failure, ugly beyond being good or evil or foe or ally. Who can blame an adolescent for hoping his future won't look like anything he's seen at that crossroads?

But Snape looks different when Harry sees him re-entering the war on his unspeakable mission for Dumbledore: "He looked slightly paler than usual, and his cold, black eyes glittered strangely" [GoF 713]. This is the youngest and most frightened Harry's ever seen Snape look. During this school year, he's seen Snape flinch before Moody, clutch involuntarily at his Dark Mark while Moody laughed [GoF 472]. Even Dumbledore looks apprehensive for Snape; is Snape prepared for this? With Voldemort's return, Harry has aged and Snape has become almost too young.

Order of the Phoenix

Order of the Phoenix is Snarry gold. We could talk about it all day. Of all the magnificent Snarry fodder, the best stuff comes in the Occlumency lessons.

Snape explains that Occlumency "seals the mind against magical intrusion and influence" and Legilimency "is the ability to extract feelings and memories from another person's mind" [OotP 530].

Harry is driven by the need to learn his own story his own magic. He *wants* magical influence. Snape, the double agent, yearns by nature to be seen. It's an effort for him to keep his feelings hidden. What will happen when these two powerful wizards lower their defenses, both in absolute good faith despite their antipathy, to work together on fighting Voldemort?

We know that Voldemort is the greatest known Legilimens, Snape is an even greater Occlumens, and Harry is not suited to Occlumency. The scar visions show that where Voldemort is concerned, Harry is a natural Legilimens, and in its initial, spontaneous presentation, this Legilimency did not go both ways. Snape says, "Up till now it seems that you have been experiencing his emotions and sharing his thoughts without his being any the wiser" [OotP 532].

Snape gives Harry blanket permission: "You may use your wand to attempt to disarm me, or defend yourself in any other way you can think of" [OotP 534]. On the first attempt, Snape sees Harry remember Dudley's new bicycle, Aunt Marge's bulldog, the Sorting Hat talking about Slytherin, Hermione as a cat, dementors by the lake, Cho under the mistletoe then Harry produces the Stinging Hex. Of these memories, Harry had not welcomed any but the last; the last one he claimed unambiguously as part of his story and that gave him the strength in his identity to throw off the spell.

Snape asks about the dog. He is responding both to the feeling of being hunted and to thoughts of Harry's family, whom he knows. And then hell freezes over as he gives Harry praise, or at least insults him less: "Well, for a first attempt that was not as poor as it might have been" [OotP 535].

After their next attempt, Snape scolds that Harry isn't trying hard enough. It's true that all of Harry's energy is dealing with something different. This incursion into Harry's self by an attentive companion has an effect on him that we've seen before: it triggers his memories, his feelings, so they flood him unstoppably like the Hogwarts letters through the windows in Book 1. It's not that Harry is weak, as Snape accuses. *It's that he's lonely*. . Nobody has been connecting with him accurately throughout this school year; his friends misread his scar visions, Dumbledore won't even look at him, McGonagall wants him to control himself, and now they're pressuring him to shut down his feelings further. But the more these lessons lower his defenses and bring up his memories, the more he hungers for connection and the less he can close his mind.

So when Snape enters his mind for the third time, Harry has a surge of inspiration as his memories connect and he cries out, "I KNOW! I KNOW!" [OotP 536]. He identifies the mysterious door from his dreams and he unnerves Snape by asking:

"What's in the Department of Mysteries?" [OotP 537].

It's happening. The two of them working together: this meeting of minds is the key that opens the locked rooms in the Department of Mysteries.

It happens again in the chapter "Seen and Unforeseen." Harry blurts out that Snape's job is "to find out what the Dark Lord is saying to his Death Eaters" and instead of punishing him, Snape looks "almost satisfied" and confirms that he has been seen correctly. Immediately after, encouraged, Harry is able to maintain awareness of the present moment while under *Legilimens*: he can see dementors, "yet he could also see Snape standing in front of him" [OotP 591]. This is when he casts a Shield Charm and gets a rush of Snape's childhood memories. They're making progress together. On the next *Legilimens*, Harry is so strengthened that he hurtles toward the mystery door, and the door flies open to let him through, making Snape far angrier than he'd been when Harry entered his mind [OotP 593].

Why does Snape tell Harry, "*Do not speak the Dark Lord's name!*" Why, for that matter, does he remove his worst memory before lessons but not the memories of his childhood sadness? Why, after Harry breaks into those childhood memories, is Snape not more defensive? He only gives Harry more praise "that was certainly an improvement" [OotP 592] and continues with the lesson.

When Harry says Dumbledore uses Voldemort's name, Snape mutters, "Dumbledore is an extremely powerful wizard[...]. While *he* may feel secure enough to use the name...the rest of us..." [OotP 532] and rubs at his Dark Mark.

Snape is not removing the memories to withhold them from Harry. He is not withholding *anything* from Harry. Not only is he teaching Harry in good faith, but he even trusts Harry with his vulnerable childhood. He wants Harry not to speak Voldemort's name because he is *scared*. He's hiding these memories from *Voldemort*. Voldemort has awakened to the connection and may soon be entering Harry's mind. Snape has been able to Occlude Voldemort directly, but he has learned, through these lessons, that he may not be able to stay hidden from Voldemort *indirectly*. Voldemort is not the only person whose mind Harry can read. Harry is also a Legilimens where Snape is concerned. He entered Snape's childhood memories without intention, without uttering any intrusive spell, simply by invoking *Protego*.

There are two reasons he can enter Snape's mind. One is that these strenuous lessons have weakened Snape's defenses as much as Harry's so that Snape's raw need to be *seen* has overpowered his self-control as an Occlumens. And the other is that Harry is the only living person who can see through Snape's otherwise impenetrable defenses: because he has his mother's eyes.

If Voldemort looks at Snape through Harry's eyes, all Snape's protection will be lost. This is too dangerous. Snape is almost too late: in the chapter "Snape's Worst Memory," Harry is compelled to steal a look in the Pensieve, wondering if part of his story is hidden there and it is. Snape banishes Harry in rage and shame, not finished with atoning for what he had once done, nowhere near ready for that to be seen but the banishment also has the fortunate effect of breaking the connection between Snape and Harry before Voldemort can exploit it.

What Harry saw of teenaged James answered something Harry had always wondered about Snape. Lily says to James of teen Snape, "Leave him ALONE! [...] What's he done to you?" [OotP 647]. McGonagall says to the Ministry workers attacking Hagrid, "Leave him alone! *Alone*, I say! [...]. On what grounds are you attacking him? He has done nothing, nothing to warrant such " [OotP 721]. On his first day at Hogwarts, Harry had done nothing to provoke Snape's dislike and bullying.

Now that Harry has seen James reply, "Well, [...] it's more the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean..." [OotP 647], and Snape knows Harry has seen it now that Snape has seen the pitiless reality behind his fantasy of Harry's celebrity childhood and Harry has seen Snape be tormented for sport can they keep denying they have common ground? No; they can keep disliking each other, but they can't unlearn each other's stories.

Half-Blood Prince

In sixth year, after a spectacularly bad arrival in Hogsmeade, Harry finds himself locked out of Hogwarts. Then Rowling gives us one of her most evocative images, one that we will see again:

A lantern was bobbing at the distant foot of the castle. [...] It was not until the glowing yellow light was ten feet away from them, and Harry had pulled off his Invisibility Cloak so that he could be seen, that he recognized, with a rush of pure loathing, the uplit hooked nose and long, black, greasy hair of Severus Snape.

"Well, well, well," sneered Snape [HBP 159-60].

They're not going to get along, are they. Despite everything they've learned, Snape will insist upon accusing Harry of arriving late "so that everyone sees you, which is what you wanted, I'm sure" [HBP 162], as if Harry broke his own nose for effect. When Snape attempts to teach ("Pathetic, Weasley [...] Here let me show you" [HBP 180]), Harry will overreact as though it were a sneak attack, knocking Snape off his feet with the strength of his Shield Charm. As Lupin says gently, "You are determined to hate him, Harry" [HBP 333].

Yet Snape still has to teach him. He devises an ingenious solution that, once again, hides Harry's strengths in plain sight where Voldemort will not understand them. This strange, fantastical, near-perfect volume is Snape's alternate universe that moves time backward and forward to play out the question: Could Snape and Harry ever have been friends? Harry loathes the adult Snape, but in the Pensieve, he felt empathy for teen Snape. Kids teach each other outside the classroom; Harry listens to friends where he won't listen to teachers. Through the textbook that records the last, darkening year of his friendship with Lily, Snape has found another way to transmit knowledge to Harry while remaining undetected.

This is the year that wasn't supposed to exist. Dumbledore ought to have died from the injury he sustained while in flashback to Ariana's death. Snape was never supposed to teach Defense. Snape bought them all an extra year to put their affairs in order. Snape authored this extra year of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*.

It's not just that Snape goes back in time; his timelines converge and collapse spectacularly as though a *Reducto* has hit them. So many miserable stages of his life are represented:

- * His childhood, including Eileen's books.
- * Slughorn back.
- * Voldemort back.
- * Draco taking the Dark Mark.
- * Harry tracking Draco the way teen Snape tracked Lupin.
- * Trelawney letting slip who overheard the prophecy.
- * His own inventions used against him.
- * And then one of the dunderheads has to go use *Sectumsempra* on the other dunderhead.

And every moment is haunted by the ghost of his ruined friendship with Lily.

In this volume named after a mother, Harry gets parts of his mother's story back. The mixed blessing that is Horace Slughorn shows Harry someone who loved Lily Evans, remembered her spark, and felt disproportionate guilt for her death. Only Harry can get the memory from Slughorn. Like the locked room that melted Sirius Black's knife, this is something that responds only to the right person and not to aggression. The story belongs to Harry, Harry's the one Slughorn hurts by withholding it, and he's the only one who can offer Slughorn relief from his guilt.

Poor Hermione is wretchedly jealous this whole volume. This is the book where Harry comes into his own, pulling ahead of Hermione, drawing even with Snape in some areas. But it's also that, like Lily, she's wary of her friend's enchantment with someone morally dodgy. Harry revels uncritically in the cleverness of the Prince's spells, the "imaginative little jinxes and hexes scribbled in the margins, which Harry was sure, judging by the crossings-out and revisions, that the Prince had invented himself" [HBP 238].

"Imaginative." This word sparkles with admiration, perhaps the most joyous compliment in the series. Harry has a bit of a crush on the Half-Blood Prince, doesn't he. And we don't even need slash goggles to see that.

Harry and Ron dismiss Hermione's concern, arguing that there's nothing wrong with *Levicorpus*. Harry even wonders if his father could have invented it until she chills them all by reminding them that Death Eaters used this spell: "Dangling people in the air. Making them float along, asleep, helpless" [HBP 241].

Anyone can appropriate any magic for good or evil. But Snape knows that some of his youthful inventions were damaging in intent. He knows he taught his inventions not only to classmates and students but also Death Eaters, and through this transmission, the damage proliferated beyond his ability to contain and undo it.

Harry doesn't know what he's doing when he casts *Sectumsempra* on Draco. Snape does.

That's the moment. That's when present-day Snape and teen Snape come face-to-face and Snape has to pay, once again, for what he brought into the world, the always-bleeding rift he created when he chose Dark Magic over Lily. That's the moment we see true Snape, the terribly beautiful man who heals Draco with "an incantation that sounded almost like song" [HBP 523]. It's a language Harry doesn't know. This is the language of remorse, the vow to force the self to drink the bitterness again and again, even if it keeps the self fixed in trauma, because this is where you have to be to undo Dark Magic. Only someone who knows how it happened can travel there to heal it. This willingness is the greatness of Snape.

And then, oh, no. Snape and Harry face each other again. It's almost sexy how Snape drags the image of the textbook to the front of Harry's mind and there's not a thing Harry can do about it. Snape wants his story back. But guess what? It's too late. Once you release your magic, it's out in the world. The best he can do is keep Harry in detention to drive home that there will be no Quidditch, no romance, no anything if he ever plays with Dark Magic again. It's classically awful Snape humor to threaten detentions into the next year; Snape knows perfectly well he won't be there, but he is really, really mad.

Harry has not yet cast an Unforgivable; he doesn't know the full meaning of what he's seeing when Snape kills Dumbledore. But what adult readers recognize, especially anyone who's ever taught or cared for a young one, is the parallel between that *something extra*, that push of experience you need to reverse Dark Magic, and the caregiving maturity that infuses all of Snape's vivid responses to Harry during the Flight of the Prince. This is a language that Harry does not yet understand.

There is no one alive, now, who recognizes Snape for his true self. He is profoundly alone. At Dumbledore's funeral, Harry grieves that "the last and greatest of his protectors had died, and he was more alone than he had ever been before" [HBP 645]. It's not yet time for their minds to meet.

Deathly Hallows

Deathly Hallows opens brutally with Snape witnessing torture and then his character is absent for almost 500 pages. While Harry goes underground, Snape endures lonely notoriety as the Death Eater headmaster. Dumbledore left Snape without a living soul to believe his goodness, but he granted Snape a different gift. Having to wait till the last moment to give Harry a message gives Snape the comfort of an ally. Snape spent his final year tracking someone who was unknowingly working in tandem with him, from the outside, for the same cause.

Harry masters Occlumency, though Snape has no way to know this. What Snape knows is that Voldemort has become unhinged, desperate, so he's likely to fear the pain of the scar connection with Harry. Harry has always had Legilimency into Voldemort's mind; perhaps Harry has mastered the scar connection. If he has, then any contact Snape has with Voldemort can be a covert way of passing information to Harry.

Through the scar, Harry knows: "Voldemort was at the gates of Hogwarts; Harry could see him standing there, and see too the lamp bobbing in the pre-dawn, coming closer and closer" [DH 499].

It's the same image we saw in *Half-Blood Prince*, the light bobbing nearer in the darkness as Snape comes to let Harry into Hogwarts. But Rowling doesn't explain who's carrying the lamp. She lets it dawn on us gradually. It's the same light we see from the Deluminator, the same light from the silver doe saying *This way lies truth*. It is not an abstract light. It is a light between the minds of two people.

Closer and closer. Voldemort is nearly there.

Snape and Harry are flanking Voldemort, closing in on him.

After almost 500 pages of absence, Snape returns to the reader, like a lover who has come to meet us. Voldemort thinks Snape is coming to usher him into the castle, but it's not him; it's Harry, riding into Hogwarts through Voldemort's eyes without being detected. And it's us.

Rowling has often shown Harry feeling as though he, himself, is doing what Voldemort is doing during the scar-visions: attacking Mr. Weasley, punishing Death Eaters, speaking in that cold high voice. The morning Voldemort returns to Hogwarts, it happens again; Rowling deliberately confuses the reader, at first, about whose point of view we see.

"And now everything was cool and dark: The sun was barely visible over the horizon as he glided alongside Snape, up through the grounds toward the lake. [...] Snape bowed and set off back up the path, his black cloak billowing behind him. Harry walked slowly, waiting for Snape's figure to disappear" [DH 500].

It is done. Snape's mind and Harry's mind are in contact again. Voldemort doesn't know it, but from this moment, he's as good as dead.

When Harry physically returns to the castle, one of the first things he does is cast an Unforgivable Curse.

If they are Unforgivable, punishable by a life sentence in Azkaban, why is the hero casting two of the three? Why is Dumbledore pushing Snape to cast the worst of them, the irreversible one that splits souls, when he won't permit Draco to do so out of concern for Draco's soul? Why is it evil when the Carrows use the Cruciatus Curse and presumably forgivable when Harry does? "Mudblood" isn't a curse, but it's described as an "unforgivable word" [DH 675]; is it in the same league? Should Lily have forgiven Snape? Does he deserve forgiveness after calling her that, or should he go to his grave unforgiven, his labors and sacrifices insufficient to atone for that crime?

They are called Unforgivables because it is not forgiveness that absolves them. It is remorse.

You can only pay your debt by doing the work *within yourself*. The imprisonment Azkaban, Nurmengard that is just to keep the world safe from you until that happens. That's the point of showing even the near-saintly Harry casting the Imperius out of regrettable necessity and Cruciatus out of vengeance. People may do such things in their lives. There has to be a way to regret and atone; otherwise, once you do such a thing, are you supposed to just kill yourself? It's possible to commit crimes *and still come back*. Still have an intact or reintegrated soul. It's possible even to go as far as Grindelwald did and finally reintegrate, although it might kill you.

That is why Rowling writes Lily as not forgiving Snape. It is not for Lily to forgive Snape. *That doesn't work*. What works is for people to understand what they have done and know they will not do that again because being forgiven by another before having fully understood the original crime, and thereby earned the forgiveness, creates *further unease*. By recognizing the enormity of Snape's betrayal, Lily demonstrated for him how important this was, how absolute. Had she minimized the far-reaching effects of his incomprehension, he would not have had such a clear idea during his second chance, the atonement-themed latter half of his life, of what he had to understand. Yes, siding with those who would exterminate a person IS condemning that person to death.

Harry, at 17, is strong enough to come back from the two lesser Unforgivables if he chooses. He has what it takes to regret *Imperio*. We don't see if he regrets the Cruciatus. Draco terribly regrets the *Crucios* he performed under Voldemort. Neither of them has what it takes to come back from murder.

When Snape agrees to cast the Killing Curse on Dumbledore, he commits to fracturing his soul and then reintegrating it through remorse. His remorse is the one time Rowling shows us a character undergoing this process that is so painful, it could kill you. That's when we see *why* Snape has resisted empathy for Harry all these years, letting his antipathy spin implausible stories about Harry's arrogance or attention-seeking. He was staggered by the enormity of the damage he had caused Harry. He couldn't bear to feel the remorse; he was afraid it would kill him.

By asking Snape to kill him for love, Dumbledore has enabled Snape to atone for betraying Lily. The aftermath of Dumbledore's death opens Snape to this remorse because the Killing Curse shatters not only his soul but his defenses against his guilt. When Sirius Black's death sent Dumbledore into flashback about Ariana, it weakened his defenses so much that he made an elementary mistake with the cursed ring. Snape knows that he will be similarly undone by killing Dumbledore.

This was Dumbledore's answer to that haunting question, "And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?" [DH 683]: his trust that Snape had the greatness to do something Dumbledore himself probably couldn't do. Snape knows so deeply how to reverse Dark Magic that he can *travel farther into darkness than he's ever gone before* and still be able to reintegrate his soul, and that will do it, that will finalize his atonement for betraying his friendship, will do the thing that *forgiveness from another* cannot achieve.

So he kills Dumbledore and tears into Sirius Black's bedroom, probably the one place in the world he most despises. The room, once handsome, is now in ruins, dusty and cobwebbed. It's what's left of Harry's godfather. The letter and photo from Lily show a happy child, a birthday, a cat. This is what Snape has taken from Harry. This is what forces Severus Snape to his knees, tears dripping from the end of his nose, when nothing else nothing can break this great man. He performs the spell for remorse: he re-enacts the damage, ripping the family photo apart like he once asked for Lily's life and not her husband's or child's, coveting the love that wasn't his. He throws half the letter and photo onto the floor that is the magic that will call Harry to him to collect the other half, the photo of Lily and her love, the story he should have had that Snape once stole from him, the fullness of his maternal inheritance that will give him the power to win over Voldemort.

Snape's redemption came earlier than his death. His final year, he lived as a whole man.

The moment comes to give Harry the message. The minds of these two men meet; each can finally give the other what he needs. Harry looks at Snape and sees him, unoccluded. Snape sees Harry for who he is and returns to him his story. Their understanding forms the key, releasing the "force that is at once more wonderful and more terrible than death, than human intelligence, than forces of nature" [OotP 843-4] from the locked room in the Department of Mysteries that they can only unlock together.

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