

## **TRACING TOM'S EXISTENTIAL MARCH FROM TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE TO LORD VOLDEMORT**

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### **Abstract**

Jean-Paul Sartre is of the view that it is not birth but the choices and decisions made after birth which defines the essence of a person. This is the reason why he believes in the idiom of 'existence precede essence'. This idiom forms the basis of this paper as it discusses the question of existential angst as found in the character of Lord Voldemort, the villain of *Harry Potter* series. This paper attempts to trace the choices and decisions which led Tom Marvolo Riddle to transform into the enigma that was Lord Voldemort. This will be done based on his decision to fulfil the prophecy and make numerous Horcruxes.

**Keywords:** existentialism, existence preceded essence, Harry Potter

Existentialism is one of the most famous movements of the twentieth century. It is credited to have brought forth to the centre man as an individual being whose essence is decided by himself and is based on his own decisions. According to Sartre, existentialism is to be seen as a doctrine which provides a possibility to human life and proclaims that 'every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity' (Sartre 18). He divides the existentialists into two categories: Christians and atheistic existentialists, and places himself in the second category with Heidegger and other French existentialists (Sartre 20). While the Christian existentialists put their faith in God and human existence through him, the atheistic existentialists suppress the very idea of God. They believe that in the eventuality that God does not exist, the only being left in which existence precedes essence is Man or the human reality (Sartre 22). According to Sartre, Man 'first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself' (Sartre 22). This leads to the assertion that there can be no human nature as there is no God to pre-conceive it (Sartre 22). This means that at birth, Man is nothing as there is nothing to define him. After Man comes to exist, he begins to understand which allows him to think and act. It is through these actions that human life derives its essence. For Sartre, this stands for the first principle of existentialism (Sartre 22). Furthermore, existentialism gives great importance to subjectivity which is dependent only on the person who is making the choice and no one else. However,

by the act of choosing for oneself, man in a way chooses for all men while keeping in mind the image of Man as he ought to be (Sartre 24). The keyword here being choice which depends on an individual and his perception of the ideal Man. This is where the *Harry Potter* series begins, that is, with choice. Each of the characters is given the opportunity to make an individual choice based on their own subjectivity. While Harry, the protagonist chooses to fight against Lord Voldemort, Draco chooses to fight for Lord Voldemort. But the biggest choice in the whole series, other than Harry, is made by the character of Lord Voldemort.

The whole *Harry Potter* series finds essence in a prophecy made near the birth of Harry. However, it finds mention only in the fifth book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*. The reader as well as Harry are made aware of the prophecy which fills in the gaps left at the beginning of the series. The prophecy being mentioned here is made by Sybill Trelawney during her interview to Dumbledore:

*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. . . . THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD WILL BE BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES. . .*  
 . . (Order of Phoenix 841)

As can be seen, the first half of the prophecy does not even mention whether the child is a boy or a girl. It only gives a few features related to the coming vanquisher of Lord Voldemort. The first being that the child's parents have already defied the Dark Lord on three occasions and the second is that the child will be born towards the end of July. This part of the prophecy is believed to have been overheard by Severus Snape who narrated the same to Lord Voldemort. It is only in the second part of the prophecy that one is able to gather that the child is a boy. Lord Voldemort being a megalomaniac that he was could not allow for this to happen. Therefore, it was his own choice to give heed to this prophecy and search for the child who could one day defeat him. After some research, the list of the potential vanquishers was narrowed down to two boys who were born towards the end of July and whose parents were a part of the Order of Phoenix, an underground revolutionary group working against Lord Voldemort's regime. As a consequence, both set of couples had defied the Dark Lord on three different occasions. One of the boys was Harry Potter, born to a pure-blood father, James Potter and a muggle-witch mother, Lily Evans which made him a half-blood. The other boy was Neville Longbottom who was born to pure-blood parents, Alice and Frank Longbottom. In the end, Lord Voldemort chose Harry over Neville to become his equal and sealed his fate. But can it be called a sealing of fate by Lord Voldemort? No, it cannot. The reason being that Lord Voldemort had made a choice the instant he was informed about the prophecy. He chose to eliminate the boy before he became a threat to his power. As can be

deduced from the *Harry Potter* series, Sybill Trelawney was not quite as proficient in the art of fortune-telling as her famous father. Her visions were like episodes and were always deficient in information. Dumbledore did not intend to hire her as she could not live up to the expectations generated from being her father's daughter. Therefore, there was no need for Lord Voldemort to take the prophecy to be true, yet he chose to believe it to be correct and began his hunt for Harry. This is similar to the Hindu story of Kamsa and Krishna. Like Kamsa, Lord Voldemort believed in the prophecy of his annihilation and wanted to kill his enemy at birth. But he could not kill the boy as the Potter family was hidden very well. Finally, when Peter Pettigrew changed sides Lord Voldemort received the information he desired so much. But he was once again presented with an opportunity to make a choice due to the request of his most proficient general, Severus Snape.

Snape had requested the Dark Lord to spare the life of Lily Potter, a request he chose to grant till the end. After finding out the Potter's hideout, Lord Voldemort killed James Potter instantly but did not harm Lily for quite some time. He asked her to step aside but Lily being a mother did not choose her life and kept on pleading with the Dark Lord to kill her and spare her child. This tested the patience of Lord Voldemort to a great extent who then once again made a choice to not grant his loyal servant's request and ended up killing Lily Potter. Lord Voldemort could still have stopped but he went ahead and fulfilled that part of the prophecy which he had not even heard of. In the process, he was vanquished and a piece of his soul latched itself to Harry and another one of his Horcruxes was created but without his knowledge this time. Due to the fear of defeat and death, Lord Voldemort made the choices he made which followed the prophecy. However, they were not decisions taken in the heat of the moment. They were well thought out decisions which involved precision and planning. His actions proved that he would always choose power and prestige over everything else which made him the most evil and feared character in the series. According to the series, Lord Voldemort's evilness surpassed all the previous benchmarks set up by Grindelwald. So does this mean that Lord Voldemort was born evil? The answer is once again, no. To understand this better, it is pertinent to go back to the origin of the character named Lord Voldemort.

Lord Voldemort is like the stage name of the character in the series and is not his birth name. He was born as Tom Marvolo Riddle to a pure-blood witch mother and a muggle father. He was named after his father and maternal grandfather but never knew any of them. His mother belonged to a long line of pure-blood families which traced their origin to the Peverell brothers of the Deathly Hallows fame. According to his maternal grandfather, Marvolo Gaunt, the family were the last living descendants of Salazar Slytherin, the eponymous founder of Hogwarts. He was able to prove his genealogy with the help of two things: the ring with Peverell coat of arms and the locket which belonged to Salazar Slytherin. Tom's mother, Merope Gaunt, died after giving birth to him in an orphanage where he grew up till Dumbledore came to fetch him for studying at Hogwarts. As a child, Tom was

born with magic but never knew what it was or how he came about it. His acquaintances were all muggles who had no idea about his magical powers. Just like Harry whose hair would grow back each time his aunt and uncle would cut it, Tom did not know how things around him happened. When Harry became annoyed with his cousin, he was able to free the boa constrictor. Similarly, when Tom was annoyed different things happened to the people who annoyed him. Like Harry, Tom too did not have any explanation as no evidence could be found against either of them. Tom was not happy in the orphanage as he was treated differently and most kids were afraid of him but once he realized that he was a wizard, there was wild happiness on his face. In his happiness, he informed Dumbledore about the different acts he was able to perform: "I can make things move without touching them. I can make animals do what I want them to do, without training them. I can make bad things happen to people who annoy me. I can make them hurt if I want to" (*Half-Blood Prince* 271). When read closely, each of his acts start with 'can' and the quote finishes with 'want to'. These words show that Tom was not born evil as he always had a choice. Every time, it was his decision to choose the path he wanted to follow. He knew he was extraordinary and so hated his name 'Tom' because it was a very common name and wanted to be different than the rest of the world. In order to come across as exceptional, Tom rejected Dumbledore's offer to escort him to Diagon Alley, unlike Harry who was assisted by Hagrid. Furthermore, he cunningly chose not to divulge one piece of information to Dumbledore until the last moment before their parting. It was then that he mentioned: "I can speak to snakes. I found out when we've been to the country on trips — they find me, they whisper to me. Is that normal for a wizard?" (*Half-Blood Prince* 275). Tom chose to divulge this information at the last moment in order to impress the professor in front of him and to confirm whether he was extraordinary or not.

A few traits that were deduced by Dumbledore based on his first encounter with Tom were that he was 'highly self-sufficient, secretive, and, apparently friendless' (*Half-Blood Prince* 277). In the first few years of his training at Hogwarts, Tom rid himself of all things which made him ordinary. The first of these were his name which attached him to a muggle father, something he despised. He preferred the name of Lord Voldemort, a mask which took over his real self once he entered the world outside of Hogwarts. In the beginning, the name Lord Voldemort was more of a code name like Padfoot and Wormtail for Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew. But as Tom matured, he came to believe that his birth name which made him ordinary would not strike fear in any listener as it was associated with a model student of Hogwarts who coincidentally belonged to the Slytherin house. On the other hand, the name Lord Voldemort would be able to perform this feat as it had no history associated with it and depended only on his actions and his decision to spread evil and hatred. In order to destroy his humble past which he was ashamed of, he not only killed his father and grandparents but even murdered his maternal uncle, Morfin Gaunt. He wanted to bury his identity of Tom Marvolo Riddle and by committing these acts, he became the sole living being who knew

about his ordinary origin. Another important thing was that Tom liked to collect trophies in his childhood which reminded him of different acts of evil he chose to perform. Later on, these trophies of Tom took the shape of Horcruxes which then came to belong to Lord Voldemort. Tom knew everything there was to know about Horcruxes which can be gathered from the memory of Professor Slughorn, handed over by the latter to Harry. It is quite apparent in the memory that Tom Riddle wanted to only confirm his knowledge and knew that only one professor could help him. His decision to approach Professor Slughorn was a pre-planned choice as he already knew that he could get all the information out of the Professor. Tom Riddle knew that Professor Slughorn liked extraordinary things and as he was an extraordinary student, the Professor was an easy target. Another thing which should be noted is that Tom knew that making even one Horcrux could destabilize a person's soul to a great extent and still he yearned to make seven of them. However, Lord Voldemort chose only to make six Horcruxes, willingly and knowingly. For this, he chose to commit the gravest of sins and then used it to create Horcruxes. Lord Voldemort did not make Horcruxes just for the sake of fun but to prove that he was extraordinary by attaining immortality. He chose the Dark Arts for his benefit and to satiate his hunger for power and once again to distance himself from his ordinary origins.

After finding out his relation to the great Salazar Slytherin, Tom knew that he was the latter's true heir. This meant that he had the qualities which were needed to open the Chamber of Secrets which was till then considered to be a legend forged by Slytherin's followers. He was not only able to find the Chamber of Secrets but was also able to open it and free the beast within. As he was the true heir, the beast known as the Basilisk only answered to him. Tom unleashed the beast on Hogwarts which resulted in the death of one of the students, Myrtle Warren. As a result of this and the fact that Dumbledore began to suspect him, Tom closed the Chamber for the time being and opened it once again with the help of Ginny Weasley, more than fifty years later. It is in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, that one realizes the major difference between Lord Voldemort and Tom Marvolo Riddle. While Lord Voldemort seemed more like an enigma to Harry, Tom was very approachable and understanding. Moreover, the memory of Tom felt enamoured by the aura of the Dark Lord as he represented the former's future self. At one point of time, Tom even showed a kind of reverence to the name as well as the person that embodied the title of Lord Voldemort. It meant that the memory of Tom still wanted to achieve what his future self of Lord Voldemort had already achieved.

Coming back to the condition of Lord Voldemort after his defeat at the hands of a child, the reader is informed that due to his cursed existence, Lord Voldemort was forced to possess the bodies of other creatures. At first, he chose the body of Professor Quirrell who as a result had to nourish himself with unicorn blood. But once again, Lord Voldemort's decision backfired on him as he was neither able to steal the Philosopher's Stone nor was he able to kill Harry. This led him to drop the idea of ever possessing another human being and



he then chose to possess animals. As he was a parseltongue and snakes were attracted to him, he finally settled on snakes as his temporary abode until he was rescued by Wormtail. Then, in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, he chose to finally acquire a definite physical form based on a sacrifice he had invented on his own. For this, he resurrected himself, by using his enemy's blood which further created a deeper connection between him and Harry. It should be noted that it was his choice not to let anyone else kill Harry which, in a way, always assisted Harry in his escape. There were many occasions when someone else could have killed Harry, but Lord Voldemort wanted to do it himself so that he could defy the prophecy which was made in relation to him.

Lord Voldemort and Harry are not connected only by the prophecy but possess many other commonalities. Both of them were orphans, both were raised in places they were not loved, both were half-bloods and so both had to go through a similar kind of existential angst in their lives. The end result was however different for each. While Harry chose the path of love and sacrifice, Lord Voldemort chose the path of evil and Dark Arts. It is to be stressed here that both Lord Voldemort's and Harry's action reflect their thoughts about how Man ought to be. The only difference being that the former wanted Man as reflected in him to be extraordinary and so promoted evil while Harry was happy with an ordinary and good image of Man in him. All the above mentioned examples point to the fact that Tom was not born evil, he chose to become evil by building the façade of the perfect Man in the name of Lord Voldemort. He chose his destiny which ended up following the prophecy but was then negated by Harry who also chose to nullify the part saying, '*NEITHER CAN LIVE WHILE THE OTHER SURVIVES*' by walking to his own death (*Order of Phoenix* 841). But once again, Harry was assisted in this by Lord Voldemort who took it upon himself to kill Harry and in the process freed the boy of the piece of his soul latched onto Harry. All these instances show that it was always Tom's (and later Lord Voldemort's) decisions, rather than his birth, that defined his essence.

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