



Research Paper

Peter Pettigrew: A Lion-heart or a Rat?

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Abstract

The *Harry Potter* series features three major characters namely, Harry Potter, Lord Voldemort and Albus Dumbledore. But this in no way negates the importance of the minor characters who assist each of them. One of these minor characters is Peter Pettigrew, an old friend of James Potter who also becomes the means for his death. In the series, Peter Pettigrew is shown to be a very fragile, weak and coward kind of a character who is to be pitied. Due to this reason, he is mostly sidelined and trampled upon by other people. He is cursed upon and scorned upon for his actions. However, an interesting thing about his background is that he was sorted into the Gryffindor House when he attended Hogwarts, a house which had bravery as its defining characteristic. So this means that the reason why the Sorting Hat placed him in the Gryffindor House was because of his brave nature which contradicts his portrayal in the series. This paper will attempt to find out whether Peter Pettigrew is to be termed a brave person, a lion-heart who deserved to be in the Gryffindor house or was he a coward just like a rat who is the first to abandon a sinking ship. The answer to this question would be found with the help of existentialism and its most famous idiom 'existence precedes essence'.

Keywords: Harry Potter, existentialism, existence precedes essence

The *Harry Potter* series became a rage at the turn of the twenty-first century and is an important part of the life of those belonging to the 90's generation. The series narrates the story of the 'boy who lived' but more importantly derives force from a prophecy made by Sibyll Trelawney, eleven years before the events in the series begin. According to *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*, Professor Trelawney had prophesized the birth of a child with the power to vanquish Lord Voldemort around the same time Harry was born. For a clear understanding, her prophecy could be divided into two parts. The first part of the prophecy mentioned a child born near the end of the month of July, to parents who had thrice defied the Dark Lord. This half of the prophecy was fulfilled by two children: Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom. This was also the half which was overheard by Severus Snape who then relayed the same to Lord Voldemort without realizing that it was an incomplete prophecy. The second half of the prophecy contained the more crucial information: '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' (*Order of Phoenix* 841). The only people who were privy to this part of the prophecy were Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter. It needs to be mentioned that it was the Dark Lord who, himself, chose Harry to be his equal as the prophecy never mentioned a name and then decided to kill the boy soon after. The only flaw in his plan being that he could not find the Potter's location. He was helped in this quest by one of the minor characters Peter Pettigrew who was an old friend of James as well as the Potter's Secret Keeper. In a way, Peter Pettigrew played the most important role in making the second half of the prophecy come true. If it were not for Peter Pettigrew, Lord Voldemort would have never found out the hiding place of the Potter's and it would not have led to the events which destroyed Harry's life. In the series, Peter Pettigrew is portrayed as a coward who ran away for his own safety, which in a way highlights the selfish aspect of his nature. On the other hand, it is also mentioned that he was sorted into the Gryffindor House, a house whose defining feature is bravery. Both these facts are contradictory in nature which calls for an in depth evaluation of the character of Peter Pettigrew, in order to solve this mystery. An attempt to find the best answer will be made based on existentialism, the popular twentieth century movement.

The most famous idiom given by to the world by existentialism is *existence precedes essence*, which is a reversal of the age old belief in 'essence precedes existence' (Flynn 45). They brought human beings to the centre stage in a single instant with this claim. Jean-Paul Sartre and the other existentialists believed that a person's essence is to be defined by their actions and not the other way round, that is, the essence does not determine actions. They stressed on the point that it is wrong to assume that the essence of a person is decided at

birth which is generally brushed off as nature by others. It is the actions of a person which determine his essence. A hero is an attribute which will be given to that person who fulfils certain criteria based on his actions. He needs to show bravery, selflessness, sacrifice which are in themselves qualities which are again determined by actions. In the *Harry Potter* series, Harry is the hero and is deemed to be one by others as well, since the age of one. Harry is believed to have vanquished Lord Voldemort and escaped with only a lightning bolt scar and the title of 'the boy who lived' (*Philosopher's Stone* 17). In reality, Harry had no special powers with which he could have stopped the Dark Lord. It was due to the sacrifice of his mother that he was saved from certain death. However, this does not mean that he was not a real hero. Harry achieves the title as a result of his actions. Even though he feels pressured to accept the role of a hero yet ultimately it is his decision every time. He is presented with many opportunities to escape yet he overlooks them each time and proves that he is a true hero through his actions. Harry like a hero in search of the Holy Grail, searches for the Horcruxes which promise the defeat of Lord Voldemort once and for all. In the process, he displays bravery, selflessness and ultimately even sacrifices his life for the betterment of other people. He earns the title of the hero through his actions and not because of some prophecy. The *Harry Potter* series begins on the premise that essence precedes existence but ends with *existence precedes essence*. This is so because Harry learns about the prophecy only in the fifth instalment, *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*. As he was still a child, Harry could never remember what had happened on that fateful night when his parents were killed. This means that all his decisions from the first book till the time he is made aware of the prophecy in the fifth book are his own and not pre-destined in any way. It was Harry's decision to not be sorted into the Slytherin house, of saving the Philosopher's Stone and rescuing Ginny from the Chamber. It was his individual decision to share the glory of winning the Tri-wizard tournament with Cedric Diggory and then bringing back the latter's body after fighting with Lord Voldemort in the graveyard. He showed all the characteristics of a hero even before hearing about the prophecy. Sartre believed that a person defines his essence only by interacting with his surroundings which includes people as well as all the available opportunities. He believed that each and every person is responsible for their own actions and its effects as they are the results of decisions made by them. The same approach will be used to decide whether Peter Pettigrew's actions make him a lion-heart or a rat.

The words lion-heart and rat hold a special significance in the *Harry Potter* series, especially in relation to Peter Pettigrew. While the word lion-heart is taken from the lion representing the Gryffindor house, the rat signifies the Animagus form of Peter Pettigrew. He earned the alias of Wormtail from his school friends due to his Animagus form while another alias Scabbers was given to him by the Weasley's. However, the character of Scabbers makes an appearance first, that is, even before the names Peter Pettigrew and Wormtail are heard by any major character which happens in the third book, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. This book begins with the threat of the dangerous Sirius Black, an escaped prisoner, looming over Harry and Hogwarts. Over the course of the book, Harry finds out that Sirius Black was behind the murder of his parents. He also finds out that his parents made Sirius Black—his godfather—their Secret Keeper so as to keep their location hidden from Lord Voldemort. But Sirius changed sides at the last moment and passed the information of their hideout to Lord Voldemort. As a result, the Potter's were killed after which, Peter Pettigrew—another friend of James Potter—cornered Sirius Black in the street and confronted him for his betrayal of James and Lily. In the heat of the moment Peter tried to catch Sirius off-guard but the latter being a better and proficient wizard 'blew Pettigrew to smithereens' (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 208). This was the story which was believed to be true for more than a decade due to the discovery of only a finger of Peter Pettigrew that in a way corroborated the story. The knowledge of Sirius' betrayal of his parents alleviates Harry's hate for him. However, Harry's preconceptions are shattered towards the end of the same book when the truth is finally revealed. In reality, it was not Sirius Black but Peter Pettigrew who had betrayed the Potter's. Sirius reasons with Harry and the others in the Shrieking Shack to prove his innocence but to no avail, that is, until Remus Lupin joins them. Harry, under the impression that Sirius Black was mad as a result of his stay in Azkaban, does not believe his godfather when the latter says that Peter Pettigrew is alive. It is only when Scabbers, Ron's pet rat is forcefully taken and transformed into an aged version of Peter Pettigrew that everyone believes that the latter is still alive.

As an individual, Peter is shown to be the nervous type who is defined as the 'fat little boy who was always tagging around after them [James and Sirius]' (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 207). He is portrayed to be always in awe of his friends, James and Sirius and so stuck to them like glue. He looked up to them for help and protection which he received willingly to such an extent that he could perfect his transfiguration magic only with their assistance. On one occasion, Harry is able to access Snape's memories in which he is able to recognize Peter and describes him as 'a small, mousy haired boy with a pointed nose. Wormtail looked anxious; he was chewing his fingernails, staring down at his paper, scuffing the ground with his toes. Every now and then he glanced hopefully at his neighbor's paper' (*Order of Phoenix* 642). This description of Peter perfectly summarizes his general persona and even highlights the rat-like characters in his nature which partially justify his Animagus form. In a second memory of Snape, Harry witnesses Peter's reactions to his father's Quidditch skills which are full of astonishment. Peter would gasp and applaud every time James would make a difficult catch which resulted in Sirius ordering James to stop, "before Wormtail wets himself from excitement" (*Order*

of *Phoenix* 645). This further reflects on the character of Peter who would go an extra mile, making a fool of himself in order to charm his talented friends. If one were to attempt a character sketch of Peter, it would include qualities mostly associated with a rat. He was an opportunist, selfish, secretive, sly and yet an intelligent kind of a person. He was no doubt an opportunist as he made use of the fact that his friends were more proficient at magic than him. He took their help to learn the difficult magic of transfiguration which helped him in transforming into his Animagus form at will. This can be deduced from Lupin's explanation to Harry:

Your father and Sirius here were the cleverest students in the school, and lucky they were, because the Animagus transformation can go horribly wrong — one reason the Ministry keeps a close watch on those attempting to do it. Peter needed all the help he could get from James and Sirius. Finally, in our fifth year, they managed it. They could each turn into a different animal at will. (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 354)

This shows how Peter made use of the opportunity presented to him as a result of finding out that Remus Lupin was a werewolf.

On the other hand, Peter's selfishness can be gathered from his escape and his act of informing Lord Voldemort about the exact location of the Potter's. When asked by Sirius as to why did he not resist Lord Voldemort and stand by his friends, Peter answered, "Wh — what was there to be gained by refusing him?" (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 374). Furthermore, when Hermione asks for a reason as to why, Peter-cum-Scabbers had not hurt Harry over the past three years, even when they slept in the same room, Sirius replies on behalf of Peter:

Because you never did anything for anyone unless you could see what was in it for you. Voldemort's been in hiding for fifteen years, they say he's half dead. You weren't about to commit murder right under Albus Dumbledore's nose, for a wreck of a wizard who'd lost all of his power, were you? You'd want to be quite sure he was the biggest bully in the playground before you went back to him, wouldn't you? Why else did you find a wizard family to take you in? Keeping an ear out for news, weren't you, Peter? Just in case your old protector regained strength, and it was safe to rejoin him. (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 370)

These lines perfectly highlight the opportunist and selfish aspect of Peter Pettigrew's nature. The point about him being intelligent and sly can be gathered from two incidents, first, when he escapes after framing Sirius Black for his murder on the same night as the Potter's murder. Second, is when he escapes Sirius, Harry and the others near the Whomping Willow by transforming into his Animagus form of Scabbers. On both the occasions, he makes use of the same magical spell which was taught to him by his friends. He is able to escape in the same fashion due to his ability to perform the spell in a split second without anyone noticing. His rat form always made his escape easier and quicker each time.

His actions also reflect his independent and secretive nature which can be gathered from his decision to reveal the information about the Potter's to Lord Voldemort. He worked so secretly that none of his friends even considered him to be a spy for Lord Voldemort. His decisions were a result of independent thinking and were not forced or pushed onto him in any way. However, it should be noted that his actions never fetched him any good results. Even after sacrificing a limb in order to resurrect the Dark Lord, he could never earn much respect from either his master or his fellow Death Eaters. In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, when Narcissa Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange visit Severus Snape at his house, they ask their host if the three of them are alone. Snape answers the question by saying that, "Yes, of course. Well, Wormtail's here, but we're not counting vermin, are we?" (*Half-Blood Prince* 23). Snape then reveals Peter's secret room, hidden behind a wall of books. Another important thing which needs to be mentioned here is that like Snape, Lord Voldemort, too, addressed Peter as Wormtail. Peter had received this name from his school friends and it was representative of his Animagus form. The use of the same name by Snape in connection to vermin reflects the poor status of Peter in the eyes of the Dark Lord. It shows that even in his human form, Peter was still considered to be a rat, a pest which needs to be tolerated. As a result of his decisions, he had lost his human identity of Peter Pettigrew and permanently became a rat in the form of a human. His poor status can also be deduced from what follows after Snape's above mentioned jibe. When Peter tries to greet the two female guests, he is curtly disrupted and ordered to fetch drinks by Snape who adds that after performing the said service Peter would return back to his room. This is followed by a retort from Peter that he is not Snape's servant who counters it by saying: "Really? I was under the impression that the Dark Lord placed you here to assist me" (*Half-Blood Prince* 23). Snape proposes to Peter that he can talk to the Dark Lord on the latter's behalf if he was craving dangerous assignments instead of cleaning and tidying after Snape. In the end, Peter brings them what was ordered by Snape and goes back to his room. This whole scene is similar to an experiment performed mostly on rats and guinea pigs where the animals are let out of their enclosures to perform a task and then again return to confinement. In all this, Bellatrix and Narcissa do not even acknowledge Peter's presence or his salutations. Peter's situation under Lord Voldemort was much worse than what he experienced with his school friends, James and Sirius. While his friends considered him their equal and gave him respect and care, Lord Voldemort did not even acknowledge his sacrifice after gifting him a silver hand in return. He was dispensable for Lord Voldemort who gave preference to Snape in humans and Nagini in animals. Peter voiced his dissatisfaction to Snape but never repeated the same to his master as he was afraid. Another point is that Peter was the first one to

abandon his friends when he realized that they were specifically being hunted by Lord Voldemort just like how a rat abandons a sinking ship. These examples highlight not only the fact that Peter could willingly transform into a rat but also the fact that he became similar to a rat even in his human form. However, this does not mean that Peter Pettigrew was a coward. No doubt, he was of a nervous temperament, who seemed to be easily frightened, who was selfish and opportunist but the one thing he did not show was cowardice.

The most basic evidence in favour of this assertion can be found in the fact that Peter Pettigrew belonged to the Gryffindor House. The main function of the Sorting Hat was to sort the new students into four houses: Gryffindor, Slytherin, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. The Hat's decision was based on four major traits which acted as touchstones for each House: bravery, cunningness, cleverness and hard work, respectively. Gryffindor house was known for admitting only those students who were brave in nature. This fact can be best highlighted with the example of Neville Longbottom who like Peter Pettigrew possessed a nervous temperament. Neville is shown to overcome his nervous tendencies on numerous occasions and highlight his bravery which proves the Sorting Hat's decision of placing him in Gryffindor house to be absolutely correct. Similarly, Peter Pettigrew, too, was brave and correctly placed in Gryffindor House. The biggest example of his bravery can be gathered from the sacrifice that he made in order to resurrect his master. The amount of physical pain he had to bear with this act could not even be imagined. Furthermore, there can be no doubt that he was scared the whole time, before and after performing the sacrifice due to which he cried as well. But this does not mean that he can be termed a coward because Harry, too, was scared when he decided to walk towards his death in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. If Harry were a coward, he would have turned away. Similarly, if Peter were a coward, he could have simply run away from the sacrifice for which he willingly chopped off his hand while uttering: "*Flesh — of the servant — w-willingly given — you will — revive — your master*" (*Goblet of Fire* 641). Peter endured the physical pain which followed his act of chopping his hand and completed the ritual of resurrecting his master by forcibly taking Harry's blood and adding it to the same cauldron. His actions reflect bravery—a marker of the Gryffindor house.

Moreover, if one were to look at Peter's decision of changing sides and relaying the information to Lord Voldemort more than a decade ago, it also suggests bravery on his part. As per Sirius, it was his suggestion which caused James and Lily to change their Secret Keeper at the last moment: "I thought it was the perfect plan . . . a bluff. . . . Voldemort would be sure to come after me, would never dream they'd use a weak, talentless thing like you. . . ." (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 369). Sirius was talented enough to save himself but did not want to risk James and Lily's safety in any way. He also believed that the Dark Lord or anyone else would never even consider Peter to be the Secret Keeper which made it the perfect plan. His assumptions were absolutely true as Peter was never even considered a threat by anyone, not even Harry let alone Lord Voldemort. The Dark Lord did not force Peter to become a double agent, the latter did it willingly. Peter was a double agent just like Snape and like him was more in danger from the side of his pretend-allies than his pretend-opponents. While Snape was in danger of being caught by Lord Voldemort, Peter was in danger of being caught by Sirius. In a way, it was a brave and bold decision on Peter's part to work for Lord Voldemort while staying in the midst of his friends. Another thing that Peter's action perfectly highlight is the belief in the existentialist slogan of *existence precedes essence*. To understand this, it is important to first understand the workings of a Fidelius Charm which forms the basis of becoming a Secret Keeper. According to the series, the charm basically involved "the magical concealment of a secret inside a single, living soul" (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 205). In fact, the information which was 'hidden inside the chosen person, or Secret-Keeper' with the help of the Fidelius charm would be 'impossible to find — unless, of course, the Secret-Keeper chooses to divulge it' (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 205). In Professor Flitwick's opinion: "As long as the Secret-Keeper refused to speak, You-Know-Who could search the village where Lily and James were staying for years and never find them, not even if he had his nose pressed against their sitting room window!" (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 205). This means that even if Peter was tortured to death, Lord Voldemort could not have extracted the information from him. But the truth of the matter is that Peter delved the secret information willingly to the Dark Lord. His actions were considered to be cowardly by Sirius Black but seen from the opposite angle, they are not so. In fact they are more on the lines of cunning and cleverness. Peter knew his limitations and so he tried to overcome them by various means. He was not proficient in magic at least not to the extent of his school friends. As deduced by Sirius, Peter always looked for the biggest bully in the yard and befriended him. More than cowardice, his actions amount to self-preservation. Peter used James, Sirius and Remus as his protective shield while they were at Hogwarts. But, in the outside world, when Lord Voldemort had taken over almost everything, the latter was a safer bet for Peter. His actions felt like betrayal to James, Lily and Sirius but for Peter they were like a test of his loyalty towards Lord Voldemort.

It also needs to be noted that Peter Pettigrew was very loyal to Lord Voldemort, even more loyal than Bellatrix Lestrange. After escaping from Sirius and Harry, in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, his first order of business was to trace Lord Voldemort in the forests of Albania. He could have gone into hiding again, instead he found his master and helped him in executing his various plans. Peter's biggest proof of loyalty can be traced to his act of cutting off one of his limbs as a sacrificial ingredient for the revival of his master. He

cannot be termed disloyal to James and Lily as he was not loyal to them in the first place. Peter had been passing information to Lord Voldemort for over a year before James and Lily's death. Another thing is that he had never willingly asked to become the Potters' Secret Keeper, the duty was forced on him by Sirius. As it was a once in a lifetime opportunity for Peter to serve the Dark Lord, he could not refuse it. His bravery can also be deduced from the fact that he lived as a double agent for Lord Voldemort for almost a year risking his life at every moment for his master's cause. It did not matter to him whether his master was evil or not, what mattered was his loyalty. His duty was only to relay the information required by his master.

All the examples mentioned above point to one thing alone that Peter firmly believed in the idiom *existence precedes essence*. All his actions were well thought out decisions whose main motive was self-preservation. The most important thing for Peter was not the people around him or the society, it was his individual self. Moreover, his actions were not a result of any kind of prophecy and so cannot be attributed to his essence alone. His essence as defined by his actions reflects selfishness and opportunism. It was his individual decision to live a better part of his life in the form of a pet rat belonging to the Weasley family, which was again an act of self-preservation. Another thing to be noted is that Peter did not make any kind of move till the third book. He had no choice but to search for his master, after his truth was revealed and he was forced to transform back into his human form. As Peter knew that his master was still alive, he found the Dark Lord and then helped him to once again take over the magical world. In the meantime, the rat-like characteristics overtook his human personality and he transformed into Wormtail forever with only a glimpse of Peter flickering here and there. The conclusion which can be derived from the above discussion is that Peter Pettigrew was no doubt a rat but he was not a coward. He was an opportunist and selfish kind of a person which is representative of the essence of his being. But this essence was not a result of his birth, it was a consequence of his well thought out actions which gave him this essence. Even though he supported the evil side, his actions always reeked of bravery and loyalty. Therefore, it can be said that Peter Pettigrew was a rat with a lion-heart.

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