

Staring Into Darkness:

An Analytical Framework for Villains in Literary and Adaptation Studies

Introduction

A maniacal laugh, a knife glistening with blood, the promise of death and destruction: villainous characters are on the rise, now more than ever. Not only do films especially demonstrate an increasing tendency of fascinating, deep villains, but current works are also riddled with anti-heroic protagonists instead of the clichéd knight in shining armour; a tendency arising from “the cynicism that came with the changing world order [which] replaced the idealism required for the belief in and the existence of the hero” (Noë 16). But what is the fuel to that growing interest, and what kind of impression do such non-heroic and sometimes outright villainous characters have on audiences?

To provide a preliminary answer to this question and to further explore the phenomenon of the villain that also gains more and more academic interest, this paper formulates four ‘villain categories,’ based on a total of nine case studies and inspired by involvement and reader-response theory, that offer a useful tool for future analysis: the emerging villain, the core villain, the philosophical villain, and the repellent villain. As the first three categories emerge from a study about popular villains, and the fourth category was treated in a separate study, it may be assumed that the repellent villain can be divided into more sub-categories too. All these categories are not mutually exclusive and often overlap with one another.¹

¹ As this conference paper summarises my extensive previous research, it frequently consists of adapted passages from “Reading Over to the Dark Side: The Complexity of the Male Villain in Film and Literature” (2011, University College Roosevelt) and “Unseeing Humanity: The Interaction between Spectator and Repellent Villain” (2012, University College Roosevelt), both unpublished. The entire works can be accessed at <http://www.soulofstories.com/academia/>.

Evil Dynamics

What is a villain, exactly, and how is he or she embedded in the framework of evil?² In the fundamental sense of narratology, certain characters fulfil specific narrative functions. The protagonist, whether heroic or anti-heroic, is the main focus of action and represents the positive forces within the story even if, especially in the case of the anti-hero, they may not be too positive. An anti-hero, then, is generally “a protagonist who draws us into sympathy despite doing things that should appal us” (Mullan 91). Some people tend to confuse the anti-hero with the villain, simply understanding a villain as a bad or evil character, and while understandable in terms of cultural interest, this does not account for their inherently different narrative roles.

The function of a villain is clearly defined and differs significantly from that of an anti-hero, the main difference being that “[t]he anti-hero takes possession of a narrative without any effective opposition. Villains, in contrast, are set against representatives of good. In the great majority of cases, a villain, however fascinating, exists to be defeated” (Mullan 91). This means that a villain necessarily has to be set against the active, positive forces of the text and actively work against them in order to defeat their purpose, creating a conflict that drives the plot forward (96). Furthermore, “[v]illains are not to be quite human” (94). They are generally perceived as more powerful than other characters and are not necessarily subject to the frame in which others act and are evaluated – either because their evil nature sets them apart generally, or because, like Lestat or Hannibal Lecter, they simply refuse to be evaluated in such a manner.

But what kind of underlying concept of evil does the villain embody, and how does it not necessarily repel the audience, but generates a deeper kind of fascination? In *Vader, Voldemort and Other Villains: Essays on Evil in Popular Media*, Heit claims that the conflict between good and evil as personified by God and the devil respectively is the very basis of the

² The studies focused exclusively on male villains; it is assumed that the dynamics of female villains are slightly different from male villains.

stories prevailing in Western culture nowadays. In those, “the devil (or, more broadly, evil) has his moments, but in the end, good people and their values prevail when facing the devil’s challenges” (5). However, he points out that more complex forces are at hand: it is ultimately the individual’s choice that can turn a character evil, demonstrating the inherent capacity for good *and* evil in human nature. He further explains that “[e]vil’s purpose is [...] to provide a gauge that upsets an established moral order. [...] Evil, then, reflects the desires that the narrator knows not to speak” (5). This implies that the villain has more than just a plot-building function within the narrative, but rather contributes meaningfully to the way the narrative is perceived and interpreted.

On a more abstract scale, the Western perception of evil is fairly universal within society and easily accessible through sustained investigation and re-evaluation of prevailing moral standards, although showing some variation on a specific level. Characteristically, in popular media “the evil characters frequently steal the show, even if they ultimately fail in their various plots to subvert their good foils” (Heit 8). The general manner of portrayal suggests that their wrongdoings are often due to “some inherent quality that predisposes them to evil, a deficiency that inhibits their free choice [...] which, in a tradition that emphasises free will, disrupts how we evaluate the perpetrators in question” (8). Heit contrasts this popular interpretation by emphasising that the acceptance of evil is to some extent a matter of choice: a predisposition, a ‘genetic flaw’ that makes a character evil, would take away the very cause of evil. External or internal circumstances or even a choice would not be an issue then, which would question his status as a villain as such. He further points out that both villains *and* heroes tend to use despicable methods to achieve their goals, and sometimes those of the heroes can be even more unethical than or at least equal to those of the antagonists. In fact, especially in children’s literature and young adult fantasy fiction, “the so-called villains of the books are not violating the law, but play according to the rules” (Kokorski 142), which would make the protagonists, the ‘good character,’ law-breakers and

criminals within the internal logic of the respective world. This forces the readers or spectators to re-examine their understanding of good and evil. The problem, from Heit's perspective, then, is that people have a tendency to identify with such evil characters, through which he concludes that the binary concept of good and evil is not necessarily valid, that evil "affords specific *value* within our cultural consciousness" (9, original emphasis).

Stepping away from Heit's discussion of the nature of evil in general, Forbes examines the tendency to identify with villains, or at the very least to find them intriguing: how could anyone identify with something that he or she knows to be wrong? Mainly focusing on the presentation of evil in television and cinema, he examines the possibility of good and evil as relative, depending on the viewer's preferences. Trying to see good and evil as different perspectives rather than inherent unchanging and opposing characteristics, he finds "that perhaps they [hero and villain] are simply at odds with one another because their goals are different and incompatible. Sometimes we characterize acts of force, violence, and deception as evil, but frequently both good and evil characters will resort to these methods" (Heit 16). Both goals and methods, depending on the perspective that is assumed, are similar for good and evil characters. The perception of good and evil as relative forces, however, presents the problem of why villainous characters are universally perceived as such and furthermore such a popular object of involvement. It does not seem logical that openly evil forces, such as the Dark Side of the Force in *Star Wars*, might be perceived as a potentially good force if a different viewpoint than that of the rebels would be assumed (18). Here, I suggest that the problem at hand might be the *justification* of this different perspective as acceptable and reliable.

The ready recognition of evil characters is also based on the way they are presented – generally as much more intriguing than the heroes themselves. Forbes links the character functions to the way they are embodied as well as to the reaction and desires evoked in the spectator, thus generating an intriguing appearance:

The villain is characterized by power, whether it is the overt power of the Dark Side of the Force which Darth Vader wields, or the cunning planning of the otherwise ordinarily empowered Joker in *The Dark Knight*. The villain's use of power to achieve his or her own ends initiates the plot of a narrative in which good and evil square off. The villain's actions create a problem, and the hero's story is the process of resolving the problem by thwarting the villain's plans. Since the villain's power generates narrative drama, perhaps we find the villain appealing because *we* would like to enjoy that sort of power. (18, original emphasis)

But evil is much more than simply a necessary plot component. Depending on the narrative's goal, the existence of the villain might also have an introspective function and encourage the reflection of common values; “[i]n these cases the villain may represent an opposing perspective – and by exploring the narrative we take on the danger of examining our values and possibly changing them” (Heit 19). This solves the puzzling appearance of the villain: in order for this alternative perspective to be investigated, it has to be taken seriously, which is achieved by physically presenting the villain as an intriguing character. This narrative role, then, paves the way for the villain's interestingness both in character and in appearance:

Characters like Boba Fett and Darth Maul from the *Star Wars* movies are mysterious and hidden from us by helmets and armor, or a disguise of intricate tattoos. We don't know much about them, and so we are left to speculate about how they came to be who they are – and even who they are in the first place. Their mysterious threat to the heroes symbolizes the open-endedness and precariousness that define their role in the narrative space. They symbolize the danger that can threaten our values – or provoke us to reassess them. (20)

Clearly, not all evil is appealing even to those spectators who are prone to identify with or be fascinated by evil in the first place. To explain the difference between intriguing

and repelling villains, Forbes casts aside the notion of good and evil as binary forces and instead focuses on the narrative's meaning. Narratives in which evil can be seen as an attractive force present a villainous character "as making sense within the plot. The villain is an essential part in such narratives and hence has a well-defined and important role" (Heit 24). In narratives in which evil is a repelling force, "the villain makes a choice that derails the narrative. It's not simply a surprise or a 'plot twist,' but a feeling that something has gone wrong with the story itself, something that *ought not* to have happened" (22, original emphasis). This is especially interesting because it points out the spectator's active role in establishing whether or not a villain is appealing or repelling. If a narrative is derailed, there has to be some kind of standard that provides a backdrop against which the evil-doing is balanced and investigated. Every spectator and every reader, however, has different standards. Even seeing prevailing moral standards as this backdrop does not seem to make much sense; after all, popular villains also work against prevailing notions of what ought to be done, but they are still perceived as intriguing characters "because without the villain there is nothing to drive the plot of the narrative. This explains how we can reject the villain for his or her deeds and nevertheless consider the villain important. (...) If the villain *weren't* appealing, we wouldn't find the narrative as meaningful" (24, emphasis in the original). The concept of the derailed narrative is thus at the basis of the category of the 'repellent villain' and will be investigated later on.

The main characteristics of a villain, then, can be summarised as a character, sometimes only presented as an abstraction, who works against the protagonist.³ To fulfil this function, he needs to present the perspective or alternative that evil embodies. His immoral qualities lead to actions, which lead to conflict, organising the plot as such. The villain is therefore the necessary embodiment of the narrative concept of conflict. This, and his distorted or neglected sense of morality and pure evilness, can make him quite attractive as a

³ For example, Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings* does not feature as an active character, but he still remains the main villain in the form of an abstract force.

character. He further occupies an important role in terms of meaning: “Where our ideas of ‘good’ may need critical analysis, an evil that seems ‘cool’ can help us to see the chinks in the White Knight’s armor. In this way such narratives can show that evil is not good, but it is nevertheless meaningful” (Heit 25-26).

Four villain categories

The analyses of nine case studies have led to the formulation of four categories through which villains may be analysed. Operating within the field of adaptation studies, the representation of the villains was analysed extensively first in their source text, which was then completed by a comparative analysis of the character in the adaptation, focusing on what I called ‘complexity’. This was done to establish the overarching character concept, with a strong focus on the adaptation because, as Veugen demonstrates in the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, these can establish a more dominant and more prevailing understanding of the character even if he or she departs heavily from the original (206), possibly because film adaptations leave a strong visual impression and reach a wider audience. This coincides with Margolin’s ‘super’ or ‘mega’ character that is achieved through multiple works by multiple but unrelated authors in our cultural conscience. This mega character is “a generalized literary figure [...] which both synthesizes and transcends any individual figure of this name. Such stereotypes are based the existence of a set of core properties ascribed to the figure in all of the works in which it occurs and considered essential to it” (Margolin 70). This was an especially important approach in my analysis of the Joker from the *Batman* series. By establishing such core properties, the spectator’s reaction to the villain was explained through character traits as well as by hypothesising the dynamics of involvement.

The Emerging Villain

In terms of narrative theory, this villain was the most difficult to establish because his function necessitates a change in character role. Of the two examples analysed, Michael Corleone from *The Godfather* is probably the most problematic as he can be understood as a villainous character after his gradual character change, but he is not exactly the *villain* (i.e. antagonist) of the narrative; I therefore described him merely as a villainous character. In the other example, Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights* does undergo a change from an anti-heroic character to a clear-cut villain. The emerging villain's function is to provide the spectator or reader with a substantial understanding of his development. In order to be intrigued by him, the audience must witness the external circumstances that transformed the somewhat average being into a villain. Ideally, such circumstances are more or less unusual; they constitute the action that drives the plot forward. Since this development mainly takes place on a mental level, literature is better able to present this kind of villain appropriately. Film, due to the limited accessibility of the character's psyche, may be able to show external circumstances better, but leaves the spectator unable to completely comprehend the exact changes that the character undergoes. In Heathcliff's case, the narrative presents a complex character in the sense that many different aspects are at play in his development. In both the novel and the film, he sets out with the potential of being a good character; his predisposition seems to be such. However, external influences shape him into a villainous character, adding to his already established perception as an outsider. It is important here to point out that while the main influence on him is Cathy, who loves but rejects him, which turns him into the bitter character everyone is afraid of, all the other components of the narrative are necessary to fully understand his change and later status as a villain.

The film adaptation *Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights* (1992) largely ignores these other dynamics and reduces him to a romantic, tragic, Byronic hero whose only motive and meaning in life is the protection (and later, loss) of Cathy. In the novel, he is portrayed as

explicitly vicious and may be repellent to the reader due to his openly negative and spiteful choices. He is very open about his plans for revenge on Edgar and Hindley; apart from the love of Cathy, the hate he feels towards them is the main driving force in his life, even to the point of manipulating and using their children. In the case of Hindley, for instance, his revenge does not stop with the latter's death, now projecting his revenge onto Hindley's son Hareton by treating him the same way he was treated: "Now, my bonny lad, you are *mine!* And we'll see if one tree won't grow as crooked as another, with the same wind to twist it!" (Brontë 136, original emphasis). Although he does not abuse him physically, he does not give him the chance to become a decent person either; he sees Hareton as his own social experiment. The film on the other hand is not as open about his motives; his violence towards Isabella is shown in her physical state, and direct violence is only directed against Catherine later on. While he is clear about his ill intentions in the novel and presents them as a conscious scheme to get revenge, merely Edgar and Linton explain his plans in the film, which takes away some conscious responsibility on Heathcliff's part.

In order to understand him as a villain who works against all the openly positive forces of the story, it is necessary to focus on the role Heathcliff has in the novel where he develops into a clear villainous character. His development is not completely straightforward. The reader has the same state of information about Heathcliff until he runs away. The three years that follow present a gap in which a significant change took place, of which he refuses any explanation. Before, he had the potential of a good person; now, his change to a villain is completed. This presents a mystery to the reader, but does not discredit the change in itself because the initial reasons for his change – Cathy, Hindley, his being an outsider – have been established beforehand. Therefore, his villainy can be understood by the reader. It seems natural that he should eventually bend under all those external influences, taking away only some responsibility for his actions according to Heit's theory.

The emerging villain, then, may intrigue spectator and reader in the sense that both function and presentation of the character change throughout the work. The potential of change complicates him and leads to different possible outcomes and versions thereof. Emerging villains are an interesting case to study given that their evolution is comparable to real life, where people change constantly, but are not as easily understood in film as in fiction. This type of villain, then, draws strongly on verisimilitude to establish a relationship with the reader or viewer.

The Core Villain

The core villain is evil in his essence – and openly so. The case studies of Hannibal Lecter from *Silence of the Lambs*, Lestat from *Interview with a Vampire*, and Darth Vader in *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* show that unlike the emerging villain, this type of villain is deliberately kept mysterious and inaccessible to raise questions on the reader's and spectator's part.⁴ It is not important to understand him; in fact, it is crucial *not* to be able to understand him. He is presented as an accomplished villain from the very beginning of the narrative; possible previous developments may be hinted at, but not elaborated too much.

The core villain is the direct and conscious embodiment and representation of the binary framework of evil, although he can assume the concept of good and evil as relative forces as well, which Lestat embodies by claiming that “[e]vil is a point of view” (Rice 89). Dr Hannibal Lecter is a fascinating and chilling villain in both novel and film, with a strong effect on both reader and spectator. In the film, involvement on the spectator's part might be triggered because of his direct interaction with the camera. Often when he speaks, his mouth may be out of focus, but the eyes tend to be in the very centre of the frame. In such close-ups, he stares straight at the camera and, by extension, the spectator, thus breaking the artefact

⁴ All these villains are part of a larger series, through which their background stories are established, thus shifting their overall villain status to ‘emerging’ rather than ‘core villain.’ The analysis only focuses on the depiction of the villain in the single works mentioned, not on the general villain who is established in combination with the rest of the works.

level and the fourth wall. Other characters are occasionally filmed from a high angle, further exploring the issue of Lecter's superiority and everybody else's inferiority. He is indeed an exceptional being, with his main anomaly and appeal being not his physique, which is relatively unspectacular, but his extraordinary and disturbing mind. The forced involvement is similar to the fashion in which the novel demands the spectator to select an aspect of his personality as more dominant and choose how to interpret him: he may be understood as an abnormal human being, a psychiatrist, or as the sociopath 'Hannibal the Cannibal.' Because his character is not straightforward at all, his great inaccessibility significantly complicates the interpretation of him. The inability to understand him is just as unnerving as Anthony Hopkins's portrayal of him. Another form of direct involvement is Lecter's inherent evil that motivates each of his actions, and he takes a clear standpoint in the novel, pointing out that

Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling. *I* happened. You can't reduce me to a set of influences. You've given up good and evil for behaviorism, Officer Starling. You've got everybody in moral dignity pants- nothing is ever anybody's fault. Look at me, Officer Starling. Can you stand to say I'm evil? Am I evil, Officer Starling? (Harris 20, emphasis in the original)

He states that his being 'evil', as he is commonly classified as, is *not* due to external influences; that he was not *made* evil, which implies that evil is inherent to his character. On the one hand, this might take away responsibility for his actions. On the other hand, his ability to intellectualise this suggests that a personal, very conscious moral choice is involved. His moral incapacity, or rather his detachment from morality, is very open and honest. This however is only dealt with implicitly in the film; his crucial reflection on evil is not explored at all. Instead, his external actions and his open lack of regret are used to characterise this.

For the core villain, then, a conscious choice is involved more often than not. Unlike the emerging villain, who may try to justify his actions due to a tendency toward neutrality or goodness still inherent to the character, the core villain does not need to do so. He is utterly

conscious of moral standards and the basic distinction of good and evil, and *deliberately chooses* evil over good. By making this choice, he assumes responsibility for his actions and persona and challenges the reader's or spectator's own moral standards, forcing them to re-evaluate their view on the world. Such villains are exceptionally interesting because they can be seen to directly interact and question both reader and spectator. His inaccessibility is the very medium through which interaction and interest is maintained. Because viewer and reader are deliberately kept in the dark about the character's interior circumstances, they have to actively assume the villain's position and empathise with him in order to begin to understand him. If this is not successful, the recipient may be either more intrigued because of the challenge, or frustrated because the character's meaning is denied. The possibility to empathise with those villains by assuming their point of view may be due to hidden desires of the reader or spectator. According to Van Yperen, "Darth Vader shows that conversion to the Dark Side brings great power, stature, and influence. In reality, given the choice, many of us would choose to be Goliath rather than David" (Heit 198). In this category, the villain is both a representative and an agent of evil at the same time.

The Philosophical Villain

This type of villain is easy to define in function, but hard to define in terms of specific characteristics. The philosophical villain's function is the exploration of society or human nature; both his behaviour and his statements are deliberately designed to *make a point*.⁵ This can be of moral or social nature, or explore general philosophical subjects. While he can also be intriguing in terms of plot manipulation, appearance and character concept, it is the point conveyed to reader and spectator that make him most effective. This does not necessarily have to take place on a conscious level. The recipient does not have to be aware of the issues raised; an underlying questioning of prevailing standards that dominates the interaction might

⁵ This is not to suggest that the other villain types cannot be philosophical – all villains are philosophical to a certain extent –, but I refer here to the foregrounded function that the specific villain has.

just as well be the result. The general function of the philosophical villain, then, is to relay a certain point, more often than not a startling idea that provides a deeper and alternative understanding of human nature and societal dynamics. In *Hogfather*, for instance, Teatime's emotional detachment and flat unimaginative character is a representation of what humans would be like if their essential creativity and imagination were taken away from them. The Joker from the *Batman* series acknowledges the interplay of good and evil forces, promoting the idea of duality as well as the notion that evil has a value of its own. Furthermore, he forces the viewers and readers to investigate their own situation critically. Especially in *The Dark Knight* (2008), his unstable personality makes him unpredictable, and his motivations are entirely unclear to both spectator and characters. The only clues about the underlying forces that drive him are the different background stories he provides about his Glasgow smile, provoked by his unnerving "Wanna know how I got those scars?" in the most inappropriate situations. In those stories, the importance of his trademark sentence "Why so serious?" is reinforced by his constant forced smile and, therefore, his inability to take anything seriously in the first place: "Now I'm always smiling!" Joker's main objective is to create chaos, and he is an intriguing character not only because of his unnerving appearance and personality, but also because of the message he conveys. Not only is he a messenger, but also an embodiment of this theme, giving valuable insights into human nature in his social criticism and promoting an anarchistic society because chaos, in his opinion, is "fair." He further demonstrates his point on the basis of Harvey Dent. Here, Joker takes an incredibly honourable person and turns his goodness around, demonstrating the progression of evil and the progression of a villain, in this case 'Two-Face.'

Strongly challenging moral standards, Joker does have a point that is hard to ignore. He is in this sense a representation of some part of human nature, and by deductive reasoning of the recipient, too; "[o]ne of the Joker's best tricks [...] is not to claim that evil is better than good, but, rather, to suggest that the entirely [*sic*] paradigm is flawed. Consequently, those

who adhere to either good or evil fracture their own self-identity” (Heit 181). Drawing on this flawed paradigm of good and evil, Joker extends his statements to human nature in general with his ferry experiment, which, although it ultimately fails, conveys his point well with regard to the readiness on the civilians’ part to kill the criminals at first.

The philosophical villain, then, is mainly characterised through the underlying *intellectual* interaction he establishes with the reader or viewer. His specific characteristics, i.e. the way he is applied in the work depends on the issue that is raised by the author or filmmaker, and therefore he necessarily overlaps with the other villain types, the only difference being the extent to which his focus is on a philosophical or societal issue.

The Repellent Villain

Taking a step back from the truly fascinating villains that intrigue us, it is necessary to also include those that do not invite any kind of involvement at all, and that instead reject it. Treated in a separate study, the dynamics of this villain were again tested on the basis of case studies, but this time also incorporating the kind of empirical approach that was not possible in the first study due to the extensive scope that it covered. Based on Forbe’s discussion of ‘meaning’ and ‘derailed narratives,’ it was concluded that the reception of a villain as ‘repellent’ calls for a narrative framework that deals with a *current, troubling* social issue that the spectator necessarily feels strongly about. Although this description seems similar to that of the philosophical villain, the main difference is that the repellent villain merely operates within the framework, but does not have to make a specific statement about the issue. However, the repellent villain does have a lot of potential for functioning as a philosophical villain precisely because of his interaction with such a framework.

The two villains analysed, George Harvey from *The Lovely Bones* and Amon Göth from *Schindler’s List*, clearly fell into this category, although Harvey provoked a more universal reaction than Göth. This might be because the Holocaust, although a troubling issue,

is not necessarily perceived as *current* by some people.⁶ Harvey, who was received as universally repulsive, is characterised from the very beginning as a paedophiliac serial killer. Although the novel provides opportunities to understand his character on the basis of his past and therefore adds a human and even tragic dimension to him, this is heavily overshadowed by his actions. Arguably, his past may partly account for them, but also suggests that he could have developed differently. If he had indeed realised as a child that the worst things to be in this world are women and children, what compels him to focus on these two groups – *female children* – in dominating and eliminating them, instead of protecting the vulnerability that he notices at an early age?

The film is even more straightforward in its judgement of him, leaving out his remorseful feelings or psychological condition. This presents a significant change to the way the character can be perceived by the audience. Presenting only Harvey's abhorrent side, the spectator hardly has any grounds for emotional or cognitive involvement because nothing is provided for the spectator to be involved *with*. In the novel, his background is explained, shifting some (but not all) of the blame onto his parents, but this shift is missing from the film. Considering that the subject matter as such is horrifying in itself, a strong and elaborate justification would be necessary in order to even attempt to redeem his villainy. This is deliberately denied to the spectator and gives the impression that he has much more control over his actions than the novel suggests.

In the film much more so than in the novel, then, Harvey is presented as a core villain, suggesting that he deliberately chooses this lifestyle over the possible lifestyles that he sees every day. His repulsiveness is strengthened by the explicit depiction of his deeds. The list of the girls he killed is horrifying enough in the novel; the film brings them even closer to reality by showing all their corpses. It is possible that Harvey is such a repellent villain precisely because of the innocence and age of his victims; he is therefore characterised through them to

⁶ One participant was somewhat intrigued by Göth, partly because the subject had been discussed so often in school that it wasn't as shocking anymore.

a large extent. His character is even more gruesome because of his anonymity, his normality, pointing out to reader and spectator their inability to readily detect the evil in a person, and with this issue being very much a real problem in society, it is easily relatable. Therefore, an emphasis is also placed on the replicability of his character by alluding to other cases:

“Sometimes I saw the wounded – those who had been beaten by husbands or raped by strangers, children raped by their fathers – and I would wish to intervene somehow” (Sebold 272). Despite the amount of explanation given in the novel, the reader feels wronged by Harvey’s existence because through him, the author confronts the recipient with an unspeakable, uncomfortable and tragic truth: that “horror on Earth is real and it is every day. It is like a flower or like the sun; it cannot be contained” (186).

The framework of child rape and child murder in *The Lovely Bones* can then be seen as the main reason for the repulsiveness of Harvey. This confirms Forbes’s statement that “[w]e find these characters and their actions horrifying because they represent deep moral cowardice. These villains commit atrocities against *persons who are unable to resist*. What more, they were in a position to do real good” (Heit 23, emphasis mine). The dependence of the villain’s reception on a societal framework might then pose the problem of cultural dependence especially in the case of historical frameworks: while the Holocaust hits closer to home in some cultures than in others, despite its reception as truly terrifying, child abuse is a more universal and, above all, a more current issue. Therefore, the underlying framework of a narrative and its cultural and geographical proximity influences whether or not a villain is perceived as repellent, i.e. blocking any interest in emotional or cognitive involvement on the spectator’s part. Whether or not a repellent villain necessarily falls into a certain villain category as well has yet to be determined.

Conclusion

So why do villains ‘get to us’ – why are they able to touch the deepest, darkest spot in our soul and thoroughly fascinate us? The simple answer emerging from my studies is that villains can openly invite the readers’ and spectators’ involvement in various ways depending on the intention of their creator. Each of the villain types formulated in those studies has in one way or another an effect on the spectator, which stems from their involvement with him. They can either invite this involvement by being understandable, in the case of the emerging villain, or deliberately mysterious and challenging, in the case of the core and the philosophical villain. On the other side of the spectrum, the repellent villain deliberately blocks any kind of involvement – or, to be more precise, he blocks the *wish* of any sort of involvement on the audience’s part. Even among all those fascinating, horrifying characters, some are just too horrifying to have any kind of redeeming qualities, and the repellent villains have simply stepped over that fragile, easily blurred line by appealing to current, unforgivable societal issues.

Except for the emerging villain, whose character development is ideally examined through access to his interior life, villains work well in film and literature likewise. A striking observation in this area is the essential difference between this kind of villain and the other types even in appearance. The emerging villains that provide the case studies are both presented in a normal, everyday appearance, contributing to their verisimilitude and the better understanding of their character in the framework the spectators and readers understand themselves. The core and philosophical villains are deliberately presented in an unusual, somewhat appealing manner in both behaviour and appearance, which raises the interest on the recipient’s part in order to accept the alternative viewpoints that they present. It may be assumed that a repellent villain works best in the anonymous, everyday appearances that are shown in Amon Göth and George Harvey.

Regardless of their specific function and type, villains provide fascinating character concepts for the very reason that they deal with something so essentially human. Evil is an issue that, due to the adherence to moral standards, people are necessarily concerned with if only on a subconscious level. They present evil as both an alternative viewpoint and the embodiment of everyone's dark side, a side that one might necessarily have to get in touch with in order to function properly in society. Examining villains means examining ourselves. One may not agree with them or their behaviour, but one can hardly deny the personal, possibly uncomfortable connection that can be established with them. By openly confronting us with evil and forcing us to reinvent ourselves in terms of moral standards and personal beliefs, villains can provide us with a different lens through which to view ourselves and humanity at large.

Finally, it has to be pointed out that these hypothetical involvement processes have not been tested empirically, except for the repellent villain who thrives on them, and due to the limited number of case studies, the villain categories provided in this paper are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. They are simply meant as a tool for understanding and analysing the dynamics of most male villains in film and literature, and are thus guidelines rather than rules to adhere to. Further research would highly profit from a more psychoanalytical and empirical approach with a more representative sample, covering more case studies.

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