

# A paradoxical dichotomy of a villain

Literature



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The concept of a great villain is paradoxical. From the ancient epic of Gilgamesh to modern literature, the roles of heroes and villains have been well established. The hero most often combats adversity and challenges through a combination of ingenuity, bravery, strength and/or luck to perform great deeds or selfless acts for the common good. The role of a villain is to be the antithesis of the hero, to operate in moral contrast to the hero, to be evil and to be vilified. Yet in pop culture, some villains are almost revered, in a manner more befitting a hero. The Joker from The Dark Knight and Darth Vader from the original Star Wars trilogy are prime examples of such well-designed, famous and effective; i. e. ‘good’ villains. Why are such characters like The Joker and Darth Vader considered as prime examples of villains? Why do they resonate deeply with the audience while other villains like Deadpool from X-Men don’t?

This paper will attempt to answer these questions by considering some of the most famous villains in the fictional media and their psychological relationship with the audience. This paper proposes that some villains are better examples of villains as they exploit the pre-existing disposition of the audience, by showcasing themselves as not fundamentally different from the audience but instead are reflections of the familiar and fundamental forms of morality matrix of the audience.

## **Stories are a reflection of the psychological tendencies that of humans**

To understand why some villains, more so than the hero in some cases, are deeply impactful, one has to consider how moral psychology behind actions are constructed in the minds of humans. This is a justified approach to

evaluating characters as stories are the products of human minds. The validation of this approach is best stated in *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, “ If one reads accounts of troops of bonobo ... one sees rehearsed all the major themes of the English 19th century novel[s]: alliances made and broken, individuals rising while others fall, plots hatched, revenge, gratitude, injured pride, successful and unsuccessful courtship, bereavement and mourning.” Consequentially if one extends this argument to its logical conclusion, for villain to be truly successful; he/she must associate with audience mentally by being the reflections of different components that evolve, diverge and converge together to be the driving force behind the morality the said audience. Thus, the fundamental question of how to make excellent villains can be evolved to ask what’s the best way for a villain is to form a connection with the mind of the audience. To answer this, we apply existing theories of morality that the deal with the moral psychology of human mind to villains and identify their sense of morality. Consequently, we can find out what villains are truly reflective of why the most effective means of forming a relationship is to exploit the primal need of the audience by creating relationship between the hero and villain to allow the audience to identify and contrast with. A perfect villain will also exploit the thematic inverse relationship between the hero and villain to create tension and conflict by giving the protagonist and antagonists the same end goal but have clear, differing motives that causes the protagonist to make difficult choices.

## **The Freudian Villain**

Heath Ledger was posthumously awarded the golden globe award 2009, the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor 2008, for his critically acclaimed performance in *The Dark Knight*, as the Joker. His portrayal helped define the Joker as the quintessential villain of the early 21st century, as it was a reflection of the audience at subconscious and primal level. This helped the audience relate with Joker as he is the full-fledged manifestation of Id, something familiar to the audience. In the movie, The Joker's operands are directed by the need for mayhem, impulse, and a requirement for instantaneous satisfaction, the defining characteristics of Id. Id was one the fundamental factors behind morality as identified by Sigmund Freud. Freud divided morality the into conscious and unconscious elements. The unconscious section encompasses all the repressed traits of one's personality. Although repressed, they continue to influence behavior. According to Freud, repressed personality is divided into three components the id, the super ego, and the ego. The Id, the crudest of the motivational matrix, is concerned with the instantaneous and momentary gratification of fundamental physical needs and desires. The Joker exemplifies all of id traits through his destructive and infantile manner with no true end goal or plan. He is depicted to be extremely intelligent. He plans carefully and shrewdly by inventing schemes to discredit the Batman; however, he is undisciplined and uncontrollable. The Joker disregards all of the established conventions, even those of the mobsters, instead goes about executing his whims. To show his nonchalance towards rules, he went so far as to burn his half of a billion dollars, just to prove that he does not care, and that money is not a motive to him. He represents chaos and animalistic side of human nature,

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many times comparing himself to a dog. He is depicted leaning out of a police cruiser in a fashion reminiscent of how a dog leans out of an open window in car. The biggest reveal about Joker's personality happens when Batman has the Joker in the police interrogation room and the criminal states that his attacks on Batman are like a dog chasing a car. He asks Batman, "what would a dog even do with a car if he caught it?" Until this point, it seemed that the Joker wanted to ruin or kill Wayne's alter ego but this statement reveals that he has no true end goal other to spread chaos. This pivotal moment in the film brings his character into perspective, as does his stunt with the explosive boats on the river: The Joker is the manifestation of the animal and chaos within humans, and not only is he attempting to bring about meaningless destruction for personal enjoyment and release, but also to show that that capacity is retained inside of everyone. As he is the embodiment of the Id capacity of humans, the beliefs are inherently familiar to the audience, consequently allowing The Joker to form a deeper connection to the subconscious psyche of the audience.

### **Jung's interpretation**

Based on the works of Carl Jung, the character Joker is extremely successful with audience because it provides the audience with an opportunity to explore their intrinsic tendencies for violence without suffering any associated consequences. Carl Jung was an early 20th-century psychologist and psychotherapist, who advanced the ideas proposed by Sigmund Freud. An idea proposed by him as there exists a cognitive bias in us all that causes an individual to think highly of their positive qualities, and to underplay their negative ones. This is termed as "Illusory Superiority." The audience wants

to believe themselves to be the noblest, most honest, and the best, especially in comparison to others. This means that audiences want to project themselves on to the hero rather than the villain. However, the anthesis of illusory superiority is the Shadow. The Shadow is the part of a person's psyche that wants to break rules. According to Jung, a person must recognize, identify, accept and overcome those negative impulses to maintain mental health. This relates directly back to Freudian notion of ego. However, sometimes it is better to unleash the inner shadow, and accept the Id urges within oneself, " we all [have to] break, to be bad every once in a while." When a character like the Joker is so driven by Id, it offers up an ' unpassable opportunity' for the Shadow to unleash itself. Joker resonates with the audience since it them gives a chance to recognize and release their inner shadow and experience the adrenal rush and thrill of the action without suffering the consequences. This is especially attractive proposition for the shadow as Id is the most primal of motivation and it makes easier, quicker and more satisfying to break the rules. The Joker is a compelling outlet for the Shadow that has captivated audiences and allowed them to enjoy the depravities of their own psyche. Because the Joker acts in manners, that audience sometimes wish they could, by unleashing mayhem and the audience experiences a rush out of seeing him enjoying and embracing that true mayhem, it creates an instant bond between the Joker and the audience by exploiting the primal underlying urges. Thus, making Joker an effective and great villain, more so than even other villains introduced in Christopher Nolan's Batman Trilogy.

## **Breaking the hero-villain divide**

Connections between the villain and the hero, literally or figuratively, makes the villain more endearing to an audience. An illustration of this could be seen in the relationship between Darth Vader and his son Luke Skywalker in the original trilogy. Darth Vader underwent and lost his battle against the dark side in prequels, the same fight that Luke undergoes in the movies. Freudian theory provides an explanation for why hero-villain relationships resonate with audiences. This connection between the antagonist and protagonist is important as it introduces an element of uncertainty in the story. The uncertainty is caused as the audience are left to wonder if protagonist will join forces with antagonist due to their shared connection. This uncertainty resonates with viewers as audience mentally associate different aspects of themselves to heroes and villains portrayed. The audience initially identify with the hero's illusory superiority with their own. Audience transfer their own positive qualities to the hero and identify negatively with the villain. As the audience are omni-potent in the context of the movie, the movie acts as simulation for the audience to explore the consequences of actions as portrayed by the characters as consequence of their morality, i. e. Id and super-ego. The ego, the middle ground between Id and super-ego, is the rational, pragmatic and logical piece of ones' identity. Freud believed ego to be the identifier of "self," and its main responsibility is to balance the demands of the Id and super-ego in practical reality. Accordingly, the ultimate struggle faced by humans is to balance the primordial super ego and Id inside oneself. The balance of super-ego and id is a consequence rather than a deliberate step. Ego provides solutions and reasons to the struggles faced by humans. When ego is unable to provide an

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adequate explanation for one's experiences, one reverts to primal id or attempts to use super-ego to reason out of the problem. When the forces of good, often portrayed as representatives of super-ego in films, are unable to provide a solution or reason to the hero's inner struggles, it often pushes them from the 'good' path. This push culminates in the characters transforming themselves into the villain. To illustrate how this characteristic can be exploited to create iconic villains, we examine Darth Vader. In prequel trilogy, the fear of loss of the woman he loves pushes Anakin Skywalker away from the path of good. In Anakin's case, he dreamt of his wife, Padme, dying in labor. Subsequently upon approaching Darth Sidious, representative of Id, and Yoda, representative of super-ego, both offer Anakin their beliefs on death but the fact that it is not Yoda but Sidious who is able to provide the ideal solution that Anakin is seeking for; pushing Anakin away from the Jedi and causes him to fall to the dark side. The audience in their omnipotence can examine the consequences of choosing either Id or super-ego over the other. This association becomes extremely powerful as audience attempt pre-empt the steps of the villain and the hero in their own minds. This form of extreme association allows characters, in this case Vader, to become effective, iconic and well-designed villains. Luke in Empire Strikes Back is at the same position with regards to his sister, Leia and the fate of the rebellion. Luke can choose the dark side, embrace his id qualities to defeat Vader and Sidious and try to save all he cares about or embrace the super-ego side and sacrifice himself, his sister and the rebellion. When the audience sees embracing Id as the moral choice that has a possible solution to crises, they subconsciously root for Id. By drawing upon the audience's own subconscious attempts to effectively attempt to solve

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the moral issue facing the protagonist, the audience to conclude its better to be a villain with a chance for success than rather a victim. Thus, even though the audience initially identify with the hero Luke Skywalker, they also slowly start rooting for the villain, Vader.

## **Conclusion**

The role of the villain in a story is both paradoxical yet important. Without a villain, heroes can't be heroes. For a villain to be truly effective they must be a manifestation of the audience's subconscious moral ethics. The Joker is a good villain because he is a manifestation of the audience's Id. Darth Vader is effective for another reason, that has to do with him being associated with the protagonist. This connection is effective due to both narrative plots as well as exploiting the psychological associations between the audience and the characters.