

Villainy – Crafting a Villain Worth Its Salt

General Tips:

Antagonists don't have to be villains. They can be good people who are pushed to their limits or someone who is working at odds with the protagonists. Antagonists don't even have to be a living creature. They can be any force which negatively impacts the protagonist such as hurricanes, social upheaval, financial catastrophe, an ebola epidemic, etc. For the purposes of this workshop though, we will be looking at villains who are people or beings, not things.

- Give your villain some depth.
Villains aren't 2-Dimensional. They are real people with real motivations. Don't make them a Snidely Whiplash character (the equivalent of a Mary Sue for villains.) Give them some positive traits also.
- Give your villain some flaw.
They need a believable way to be defeated and their flaw is that way.
- Have your villain grow and develop in your novel.
Experiences change a person for good or for bad. Show how your villain's experiences affect him or her.
- Build up to your villain's villainous behavior.
Don't have your villain do something so totally out of character, you're left going, "huh?" It's too much of a jump to have your mild mannered office worker who was always kind and friendly come in one day with a machine gun and go on a beserk killing spree. What led up to that? How can you make that believable?
- Along the same lines – Make your villain's crime fit.
Choose a method of villainy that your character has the skill set to do. Show the reader an example of the skill set or hint at how the villain knows it. ie. Mention that your shooter was in special forces.
- Consider the emotional state of your villain and how that impacts his/her actions.
Ex. Crimes of passion are usually more violent and less restrained. The villain who wants to quickly get rid of someone will use something quick, however a sadistic sociopath might plan something slow and then watch their victim suffer.
- Describe something human about the villain that the reader can connect with.
Help the reader understand where the villain's behavior comes from to elicit empathy. Make the villain's motive understandable. It's more compelling and creepy for a reader to identify in some way with the villain because for just a moment, the reader can connect with the villainous behavior that way.
- Have your villain do something unpleasant to a character the reader cares about.
You don't have a villain without some kind of tension and conflict.
- Have your villain be intelligent.
An intelligent villain means your hero has to be strong to defeat him/her. Dumb villains make your hero look weak and your plot emptier.
- Villains think they are the hero of their own story.
They justify their behavior as being somehow positive. It may not make sense to us, but a villain believes they are doing what is right.
- Understand your villain's motivation and help your reader understand that too.
Make your villain's motive believable. What motivates your villain to act as he/she does?
- Get inside your villain's head to paint a broad, understandable and believable character.

Motivation

What is your villain's goal? People are motivated by positive and negative things.

- Positive motivation
The desire for something
- Negative motivation
The desire to avoid something, like a loss or a fear.

Types of Motivational Factors

(What motivates heroes also motivates villains. Make your villain's goals specific.)

Positive:

- Love/Romance – Want to win over someone. Marry the princess.
- Gain respect or acceptance. Want coworkers to acknowledge he knows something.
- Greed – get rich by stealing from the treasury.
- Power – desire to control company X.
- Revenge – Want Tom to pay for humiliating me.
- Justice – “You killed my father. Prepare to die.”
- Recover what's lost – “You stole my mother's home, I'm getting it back!”
- Honor – “I serve King Philip and will do whatever he asks even if it means killing King Henry.”
- Misery Loves Company – I'm miserable so I'm going to make everyone else miserable too.
- Protection – You're trying to kill my family. I'll kill you before you hurt them.
- Wanting to fit in – The violent fraternity hazing, done because the person wants a spot in the fraternity no matter what.
- Discovery – I'll find out Mark's secret and then I can use it against him.

Negative:

- Desperation – If something doesn't change soon, I won't make it.
- Persecution – I'm so tired of being ridiculed for my lisp. I'll make them pay.
- Grief and Loss – Once my wife died, I lost all desire to do good. It just doesn't matter any more.
- Rivalry – Jose beats me at everything, this one time I'm going to beat him, even if it means his death.
- Survival – These people are trying to kill me. I'm going to kill them before they kill me.
- Catastrophe – The volcano
- Betrayal – Princess Mary was promised to me and then she married Prince John.
- Being dethroned – They want to take away my position. I'm not going to let them.
- Avoiding negative ramifications – This corporate head is trying to get me fired. I've got to stop him so I can keep my job.
- Shame – You've humiliated me enough. You will pay.
- Fear of Losing Control – The pirate captain kills the mutinous crew.
- Fear of Losing Attention – The narcissistic man tries to get rid of the new star of the company to keep his position as shining star.

Questions to Help You Get into Your Villain's Head

Gender:

Is your character comfortable with their gender? How does it impact them? How do they use it to their advantage? Will they treat men differently than women? How so? Have they been persecuted because of their gender?

(Although there are always exceptions, there are some commonalities in America)

- Men – tend to think logically first. Emotions are less on the surface than for women.
- Women tend to unconsciously defer to men – ie. look over at them in groups to hear them talk and wait for what they have to say.
- Men can have full out conflicts then pat each other on the back 5 minutes later as if nothing happened. Women tend to hold onto the conflict for days.
- Women frequently are socialized to take care of others, think about them, help them. As such, they tend to notice if someone is hurting more easily. Men are frequently socialized to be more action oriented and don't always pick up on things like that.
- Men tend to speak directly and briefly. Women tend to speak in embellished paragraphs.
- Women tend to end sentences with a lilt to their voice, which can make them sound questioning or tentative. Men tend to end sentences at the same pitch or lower level. (There are many more examples, but this will get you started.)

Skills:

The skills that a person believes they have (or don't have) affects what they will or will not do. It's not always conscious. For example, you won't see a fighter automatically try to use a fire ball. They won't even think about trying to use magic. Likewise, your mage or sorcerer may be reticent to use weapons, preferring to hang onto magic solely. A mechanically inclined person will be more likely to automatically think of MacGyver like solutions to a problem, whereas an intellectual will more easily gravitate toward strategy.

- What is your villain's job? How did he obtain that? Hard work? Birthright? Bribes?
- What skills does your villain believe he/she has? Fighting? Strategy? Magic? Mechanical?
- Is there a skill your villain has which he doesn't believe he has? What is that? How does that affect him?

Motivations:

We are all driven by fears and desires. People can tend to discount or deny those fears and then do things to try to control their environment to minimize the fear. Also, when people have less control in one area, they will frequently try to control another as a way to cope. ie. Dad whose job is getting worse and he's getting written up a lot and is at risk of being fired comes down harder on daughter to do everything he says she must do.

- What intangible thing does your villain fear losing the most? (Power, control, attention)
- How did he gain it in the first place and what made him realize he could lose it?

Fear losing control:

- What does your villain feel he has control of currently? World? Company? Law of the land? Family?
- What made him think he was losing control of that?

- Why does he feel having control of that is necessary?
- What does he do to try to regain control?

Fear of Losing Love:

- Has your lost someone or something he loves? (death/kidnapping/fired) or does he perceive that he is about to lose something. (Affair, betrayal, young upstart becomes shiny star at work, etc.) Who or what is he losing?

Fear of Losing Attention:

- Does your villain base his/her self-worth on being perceived positively?
- Is he worshipped for being in a position of power? (god/king)
- Was she able to use that attention to her advantage? (Gorgeous woman using beauty to control men)
- What does it mean if your villain loses that attention? How will it affect him?

Control Factors:

What kinds of things does your villain do to try to control his environment? His emotions? Inflate his pride?

- Are there traits your villain has which unnerve him and make him want to have more control over himself? (alcoholic who wants to stop but the cravings are too strong)
- Has he lost control in the past? What happened?
- Does she have powers/abilities she wants to gain control over?
- Does he panic when things don't go his way?
- Is he flexible, or so rigid that change is hard and therefore he wants to control his environment more?
- Has he felt helpless in the past and what does he do to try to prevent that in the future?
- Does he need to be admired? Why? What does he need others to recognize about him that he feels are his best? Intelligence? Eye for art? Business savvy?
- Is there something or someone that he wants that he feels is out of reach? What does he do to try to obtain that?
- Does he feel love gives him the right to do certain things?

Family:

Family is one of our first influences. They shape not only our beliefs, but even have an effect on our brain development. We learn right and wrong from our families. We experience what emotions are acceptable and what ones aren't through our families. We even develop a calmer or more anxious brain depending upon how calm or chaotic or family environment was.

- Did your villain know his parents? Siblings?
- Are they living or dead? How did they die?
- What family member had the strongest impact on your villain? What family member does she love or hate? Why?
- How was your villain treated by their family or family substitute if raised outside of the family?
- What emotions were encouraged in the family and what emotions were "against the rules?"
- Did he have family there to nurture him or was he left to fend for himself growing up?

- If he had a good and loving family, what happened to turn him into a villain? Family killed? Life destroyed or threatened by someone or some power?

Friends:

By the time someone is an adolescent, friends play a bigger part of the development of their psyche than their family.

- What kind of friends does/did your villain have? What things did they value and do together?
- Does/did your villain inspire loyalty from friends? How? (Charisma/Fear/Love)
- Are the friends loyal to those who are loyal to them? What would they do out of loyalty?
- Do friends see things in the same way as the villain? If no friends with same world view, how did that affect the villain?

Views and Beliefs:

Our views and beliefs in the world affect every decision we make and every action we take. They are often deeply ingrained and developed early in childhood and as such, aren't always conscious.

- What does your villain see as his greatest accomplishment? Worst Failure?
- Is your villain optimistic or pessimistic? How does this affect the way he sees his goal?
- Does your villain feel the world owes him, or does he believe he has to work for everything he gets?
- Does he take responsibility for his actions or does he blame others for what happens to him?
- Does he think he's making the world a better place? How so? If not, what does he gain from a worse world?

These are just a few questions to help you understand the deeper psyche of your villain. It can help to explain why your villain behaves as he does. We have all had hopes, dreams, aspirations, families, childhoods. Even sociopaths have felt love and hate, loss, regret and joy at some point in their lives.

Resources and further information:

3 Techniques for Crafting a Better Villain. July 12, 2010 - Hallie Ephron.

<http://www.writersdigest.com/writing-articles/by-writing-goal/improve-my-writing/3-techniques-for-crafting-your-villain>

9 Tips for Creating a Great Antagonist June 23, 2013 - Debra Vega.

<http://debravega.wordpress.com/2013/06/23/9-tips-for-creating-a-great-antagonist/>

25 Things You Should Know About Antagonists

<http://terribleminds.com/ramble/2012/07/24/25-things-you-should-know-about-antagonists/>

39 Villain Motivations

<http://www.darcypattison.com/revision/villain-motivations/>

The Mind Behind the Mask: a Psychological Approach to Creating Villains. - L. Adryn Erickson

<http://www.slideshare.net/LAdrynErickson/villain-workshop-outline>