**Writing the Villain**

Who are some of your favorite villains of the silver screen? Hannibal Lecter usually comes up in a conversation like this because he was SO unforgettable! I also like to think of Cruella DeVille and who can forget the Heath Ledger’s portrayal of the Joker? Glenn Close in Fatal Attraction, anybody? Who are some of your favorite villains? Write ‘em down – I’ll ask you to look at this later.

The Creative Opportunity of Villains

Writing a villain who is just wears black and is BAD and who cackles evilly a lot but who doesn’t really make sense will create a crack in your story – one which diminishes your artistry as a writer.

An unexplored villain is an *opportunity* for you to more than have a *mechanism* that your main character must fight, but to really explore and personify what the depths of the human experience can yield.

Take the Time to Develop Your Villain

Often screenwriters place their main focus on developing their main character – as they should! Making sure that main character has a flaw, an arc of incremental change and habits, tics – a back story that makes them really seem three-dimensional.

As your skill set as a writer – screen or not – continues to develop, you’ll want to put as much focus and attention on your antagonist – or villain as well.

So let’s break it down and focus on five different aspects of the villain:

1) An emotional underpinning

2) Scale

3) Details/Back story

4) A logic to their obsession or dastardly deed

5) A unique modus operandi

Emotional Underpinning

What is your villain’s raison d’ etrè? Hint: It’s not the money or the girl or the nuclear space lab technology – it’s usually something you can boil down to something like RECOGNITION, POWER, ATTENTION or WORTH.

Does Hedra (Jennifer Jason Leigh) in Single White Female REALLY want the LIFE of Allison (Bridget Fonda)? Well, on the outside, yes, but really what does she want? To be loved and accepted. But since she is a sociopath, her idea of obtaining that is to – well – if you haven’t seen the movie, it’s a bit of a classic.

Just like your main character, who is initially not that conscious of their flaw and their wants and needs, your villain – even more so – is not that conscious of the fact that what they really need is a big hug and some warm milk. NO – they will focus on their plan, their objective – to GET the money, to GET the nuclear substation, to GET to the diamonds first, to STOP the main character. But underneath it all what they really want is recognition, power, worth, attention or control.

Why does this matter for you, the writer? Because if you know what your villain REALLY wants and needs, you can make them a bit more complex and human.

At SOME point you can’t help but feel a little sad for the Glenn Close character in Fatal Attraction, right? She’s dangerous as heck, she’s definitely a sociopath but there is a layer there that she is lonely. That she wants a family and love. She’s pathetic.

One of the absolute BEST films that is, in many ways, a prequel that really shows how a villain came to be a villain is [Chronicle](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1706593/?ref_=nv_sr_3). I highly encourage you to see this film if you have not. If you have seen the play Wicked, you will also get a glimpse into the mind and heart of someone who later becomes a villain.

So think about what emotional pain might be underlying your villain’s actions. It might seem froufrou\* or silly – but it’s not. It’s what good writers do.

\*Are you a weirdo like me? Do you wonder where froufrou comes from, as an expression? [Here you go](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/froufrou).

Villain/Antagonist Scale

Depending on your genre, your villain might be anything from absolutely psychotic (I’d put Cruella in that category) to deeply troubled, to desperate (and therefore maybe slightly redeemable – take Ben Wade in 3:10 to Yuma – he’s the antagonist all right – but not entirely. He does have some redemptive qualities, we find out later.

Notice – I am using the word *villain* to describe a bad guy who is on ONE end of the scale of extreme, and the word *antagonist* to describe a bad guy on the other end of the scale.

Bear the scale in mind, dependent on your genre and story.

Back to Ben Wade – IS he the only bad guy in the movie? What about the ranchers who were threatening Dan Evans (Christian Bale) as well? What about Ben Wade’s gang members? Also villains in the script.

But Wade is the chief antagonist and you’ll notice that he is interestingly flawed; he is powerful and he is dangerous but he also has – it is revealed – a slight honor even in his villainous mind. He has an aspect of humanity about him. Which is what makes him so compelling. Given the genre – the Western – this makes perfect sense. There is an aspect of some sort of renegade, outlaw sensibility in this genre. Certainly, the Western has had other villains that literally DID wear black and were absolutely horrible – but in this genre there is also room to exploit the culture of the wild, wild west and in doing so reflect some of that in a villain who might, despite everything, embody some sort of humanity – in his or her way. Like Ben Wade.

Now certainly in a romantic comedy, you probably aren’t going to have a villain (or better, antagonist) who is psychotic or sadistic. Or maybe you will – and exploit that for the comedic juice you can get out of that juxtaposition of a relatively sunny genre with a psychotic antagonist. More likely you’ll have an antagonist who is hyper vain or attention-grabbing or desperate.

The scale your villain is on can range from an absolute maniac to simply someone who is very unpleasant. Think of the genre you are writing and of the general tone of your script.

Details

Truly memorable villains are – well – I just said it – memorable. They aren’ t just cookie cutter types, they have details that make them particularly threatening, scary and compelling.

There are so many things that are memorable about Hannibal Lecter, but one of them is a very quick moment – you could blink and miss it – in which he is sitting in his cell reading a copy of German Vogue. The man is reading not only a high end fashion magazine but he’s reading it in *German*. What a weird detail. But it goes with all the other details about him that together make him VERY compelling – here is a horrid serial killer who also just so happens to be exceedingly sophisticated. Not just smart – that’s a trait that is not unusual in serial killers – intense, psychopathic intelligence – but Hannibal is more than smart, he’s genteel and cultured. Think of, I this case, the fascinating juxtaposition of being a sadistic killer who is also refined.

One way to think about details is to think about your villain’s back story. Where is he or she from? How did he or she gain the emotional wound that has led them to this point of wanting to take over the world, or to steal the guy, or to mercilessly harass their would-be son-in-law (Meet the Parents).

Now think about what details would, put together with this person, be kind of mind-bending (either in a funny or in a horrifying way) – for example, that Jack, in Meet the Parents has a cat he loves very much, named Mr. Jinx. That’s a funny juxtaposition, no? And – for your entertainment, here is [a hilarious scene from the film](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-OwMoAsP38) that I think you will both recognize and enjoy ☺

Just like your main character, whom you also bestow with details and mannerisms – hobbies, back story, the way they like their coffee – take the time to think of these types of details for your antagonist – or villain – too.

Logic

Nothing is worse than an under-developed villain whose logic doesn’t even make sense. The logic of the villain should make sense *at least on a surface level* to us – even if ultimately, it wouldn’t, in real life. But this isn’t real life this is a movie. And we get that. But there needs to be enough logic there to stand up to at least SOME scrutiny. Otherwise, you’ll lose your reader or viewer – they won’t take your villain as seriously. Austin Powers sent up the logic and reasoning of the villain brilliantly. But this was a send up. As was the entire film.

Remember the Villain/Antagonist scale, I mentioned earlier? Your villain/antagonist can range from wanting to take over the WORLD to simply wanting to split up the couple (as in Meet the Parents) and as such, they will have a plan to make that happen.

And this plan, this logic will not only be able to sustain some scrutiny on our part, but more than that, it makes total sense to the villain – *in their state of mind.*

In other words, make sure that plan, that logic actually makes some kind of sense.

I just read a very funny script and the villain who is clearly INSANE actually had a very logical plan. It was great. It was insane but it actually DID add up.

Logic and Scale Relative to the STORY

The real fun starts when the villain/antagonist is foiled and then whether or not they can (depending on where they are on the scale) maintain control or not. Glenn Close in Fatal Attraction absolutely flips out – which is when things get REALLY scary. Ben Wade actually shifts somewhat toward a redemptive act. The giant shark in JAWS doesn’t change or shift or lose control at all. It has no logic or plan. It’s a giant shark – and the villain of the story.

A Unique Modus Operandi

So now you’ve got a villain/antagonist with an emotional wound/underpinning, with entertaining and unique personal details, with a logic that makes sense to them, and with a Bad Guy scale all sorted out dependent on your genre and story.

So – how is it that your bad guy actually moves about in this world of yours, getting done what they want to get done? HOW do they try to rob the bank, or take over the world, or steal the girl?

Quentin Tarrantino broke the mold with bad guys who also quoted passages from the bible or debated what cheeseburgers are called in Europe - while in the execution of horrible acts of violence. HOW these bad guys moved through their world, HOW they executed their crimes – was totally unique.

Now, in the world of screenwriting, to use the word “unique” is somewhat of a killer, isn’t it? Because EVERYTHING should be unique in your script, right? But think about this – what is most prized in Hollywood, by viewers and execs alike – is “the same but different” – meaning – romantic comedies or action films or horror (especially horror) will always be in demand. We like to know what to expect when we go see an action movie, right? We’ve seen them before and we like the reliability of what they contain. Chase scenes, explosions, maybe a love interest – but we HAVE seen a lot of action movies (or fill in the blank) and we want to also see a twist on that – the same – but different.

So there’s a limit to just how unique the modus operandi – the HOW your bad guy does his or her bad things – surely. One thing you can do is to compare your villain to other villains in similar movies and see how THAT villain behaved – how that villain committed his or her acts of bad-guy behavior. You do not need to reinvent the wheel but IF there is a creative opportunity to give your antagonist or villain some unique approach to the acts they commit – take advantage of that creative impulse!!

This falls under the frosting category by the way – if you *can* come up with something unique for your villain’s or antagonists M.O. – GREAT. If you cannot – you’re still 150% ahead of other writers who have not given any of these things their attention or thought: emotional underpinnings, details, logic and scale. ☺

Homework

So here’s some homework I’d like you to complete and return to me if you can.

Remember when I asked you to jot down your favorite villains? Take one – just ONE and answer these questions about that villain:

1) What is the REAL emotional underpinning for that villain? (attention, love, respect, power, etc.)

2) Scale: Where does this villain fall on the scale of PYSCHO to Unpleasant?

3) Details/Back story: What are a couple of entertaining details of this villain/antagonist?

4) A logic to their obsession or dastardly deed: Did the logic make sense? Did it hold up under scrutiny?

5) A unique modus operandi: WAS there a unique way that this villain went about his or her deeds?