

How to Write Horror Villains and Protagonists



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What is a Villain?

According to dictionary.com, a villain is “a character in a play, novel, or the like, who constitutes an important evil agency in the plot.”

This is different from an antagonist, which is “the adversary of the hero or protagonist of a drama or other literary work.”

An antagonist does not have to be evil or do evil things, but a villain does.

Depicted: a villain

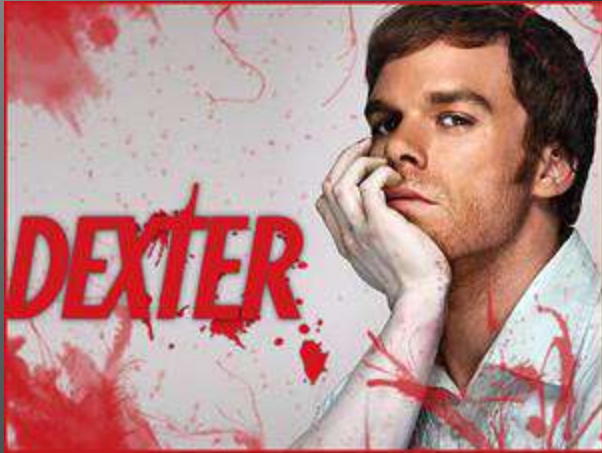


Also a villain



Villains

The difference between the terms is most obvious when you look at **villain protagonists**. Dexter Morgan is a serial killer who targets other serial killers. The story is told from his perspective, making him the protagonist, and the police who are trying to catch him are the main antagonists.



Also, entities that are not self-aware are typically not considered villains. You wouldn't say a hurricane is a villain, and neither are most types of zombies, animals, and animal-like monsters.



Appearance

A lot of horror villains have an iconic look. Think about what you want your villain to look like.

Masks blur the line between human and monster, both visually and emotionally.

Masks allow people to do things they never would without the cloak of anonymity (*Purge*).



An iconic look



Appearance

Consider what your villain might wear in a practical way. Their clothes might relate to their occupation (Leatherface, the Miner from *My Bloody Valentine*), reflect their social or economic status (Patrick Bateman, *Anne Wilkes*), or be a result of their incarceration in a prison or mental institution (Michael Myers, Hannibal Lecter).



Appearance

Analyze your villain's mental state. Do they struggle to control their emotions? Perhaps they should have haphazard cuts from self-inflicted injuries, or an asymmetrical mask that depicts their unbalanced emotional state.

Are they comical or snarky? Perhaps a quirky trait like Chucky's wild orange hair or Freddy Kruger's fedora would fit your villain.

Although an iconic look helps to create a memorable villain, don't confuse description with characterization. Appearance aids characterization.

One or two telling details will take you further than a page of description. Pace description.

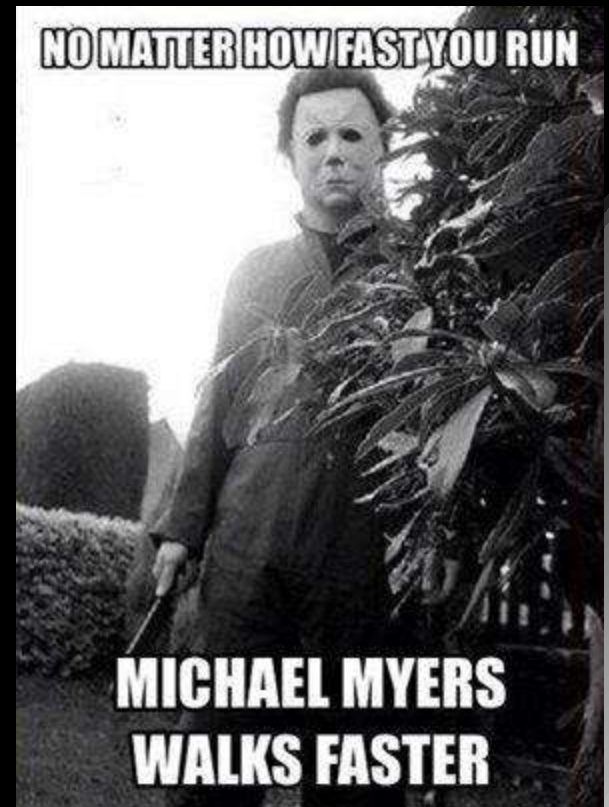
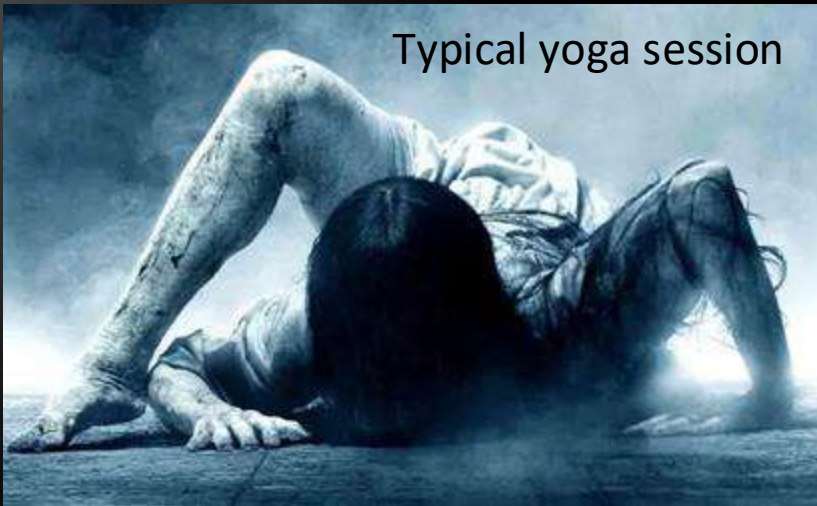
Chucky has clearly been through some sh*t



Mobility/Mannerisms

- How do they walk, move, float, etc.? Uneven, jerky gait, confident stride, etc.
- Many horror villains have creepy mannerisms or quirks.
 - Hannibal Lecter rarely blinks.
 - Michael Myers cocks his head to the side slightly when he murders someone
- Other oddities : smiling too widely, standing too close to people, licking lips, laughing at odd times, or steering conversation toward inappropriate topics.
- Strange mannerisms remind audiences of your villain's innate abnormality.

Typical yoga session



Weapons



- The weapon can be seen as an extension of the villain.
- The most famous horror villains are called “slashers” for a reason.
- More intimate than shooting
- Also strangulation, suffocation, biting, etc.
- Jigsaw helped establish a new kind of slasher with poetic traps. A razor wire maze for a man who cut his wrists. A pit of used needles for a drug dealer, etc.
- Symbolic weapons: Gage from *Pet Sematary* using his father’s scalpel to kill his mother, symbolizing his father’s instinct to heal or fix people being corrupted.
- When it comes to non-villains, giving them weapons humanizes them and makes them seem more intelligent.



Backstory

- Backstory can relate to motive, i.e. Jason Voorhees, but not always, i.e. Leatherface is a butcher in the remakes, doesn't explain his motive for killing but does explain his experience and skillset.
- Avoid the info dump!
- Backstory can remove fear and can make audiences sympathize and even root for villain, i.e. John Kramer
- Backstory often explains existence of ghosts or otherworldly beings.



Motivations

Some people think your villain shouldn't have an explicit motive.

i.e. Michael Myers versus Samara Morgan

Also depends on genre,
gothic horror v.s. splatterpunk

Motivations may not become clear
until later in the story,

i.e. *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, *Scream*



Common motives include revenge, fear, greed,
ambition, love, grief and betrayal.

Psychology



Product of physiology and sociology

Physiology: appearance, IQ, scars, strength, brain chemistry, how they dress, way of holding themselves, etc.

Sociology: social status, family, their community, birth order, schooling, early training, experiences, events that shaped and formed their personality

Nature vs Nurture, i.e. *Halloween* “I spent eight years trying to reach him, and then another seven trying to keep him locked up, because I realized that what was living behind that boy's eyes was purely and simply... evil.”

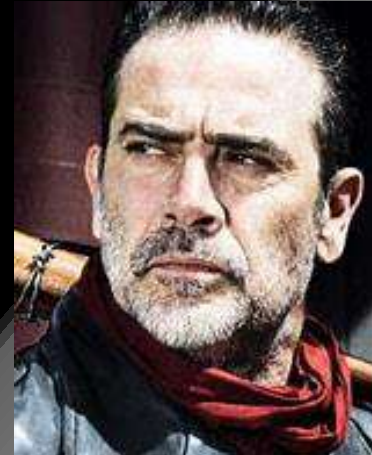
Villain Redemption

Does your villain have redeeming qualities despite being despicable? (i.e. Charlie Manx from *Nos4a2* thinks he is saving children despite kidnapping them and killing their parents). “Even evil has standards” is a common trope in horror. What standards might your villain possess?



Is there a possible redemption arc for them? Could you believably tease a redemption arc to show what is left of their humanity? How might you do that?

You could let them *almost* make the right choice before their psychosis/rage/narcissism takes over. Let them almost understand the protagonist's side before you rip away all hope of redemption.



Dialogue



How your villain talks—or doesn't talk—can reveal your character's personality, education, intelligence, and sense of humor.

Depending on whether Freddy Krueger is cracking one-liners or speaking seriously in his low, gravelly voice, the dream demon can make you laugh one minute, and then send chills down your spine the next.

John Kramer and Hannibal Lecter display their high intelligence during philosophical conversations.

Having your villain refrain from speaking can make them mysterious. Intentional silence can be an excellent source of tension. A villain that won't communicate can't be reasoned with. They seem less human.

What they talk about is important too. What are they obsessed with? How does it relate to their motivation?

Revealing Your Villain



- Some stories start off with a bang, showing the villain right away, i.e. *IT* (Of course, if your villain is a shapeshifter, that's no problem at all).
- The timing of when you reveal the villain will have an impact on your story. Waiting to reveal their identity creates mystery and anticipation.
- If you show them right away, the suspense must come from "When will they strike?"
- In general, the longer you hold off the reveal, the more theatrical it should be, i.e. *Jigsaw* and John Doe.
- Use more description during a big reveal if you've been building up the entire book to this moment.

Android Villains



- Technology turning against us is a common theme in the horror genre.
- Whether it is a supercomputer that can trap the main characters like The Red Queen from *Resident Evil*, or an android that stealthily kills people like David from *Prometheus*, there is no doubt that A.I. can make an excellent villain.
- The fact that they can look just like us but still act slightly off is unnerving.
- Sometimes their expressions don't match up with the emotion they are attempting to depict, making them appear dishonest.
- May have no reaction at all to something that would be considered horrifying to a human.
 - Their lack of empathy may not be their fault. It could be that they were not programmed to have enough human emotion, or perhaps a logic error in their programming allows them to find human life expendable in some instances.
- A.I. villains who closely resemble humans will often be disfigured at some point to reveal their mechanical innards and remind us of their robotic nature

Villainous Dolls



- Villainous dolls also usually need backstory.
- Usually haunted by a spirit or demon, which creates the same expectations one might have for a ghost story.
- Exceptions: Slappy was created by an evil sorcerer out of the cursed wood of a stolen coffin. Chucky is a serial killer who performed a voodoo ritual to escape punishment for his crimes.
- Dolls can be a fun villain to experiment with because they are naturally creepy.
- A doll can be innocent looking with just one or two odd details, and those small details will create unease. For instance, the doll in *The Boy* appears very life-like with a few exceptions. The eyes are a bit too round and too large to be human. The eyebrows are drawn on. The posture is unnaturally stiff, as if he's just been told to sit up straight.
- Dolls can also be straight up deformed like Chucky.



Ghosts

- Ghosts require a backstory more than any other kind of villain.
- Ghosts, especially villainous ghosts, often originate from a horrible tragedy. They were betrayed before they were murdered, or they were murdered in an unusually brutal way. They want revenge, or for someone to finish their unfinished business so they can have peace.
- They won't stop causing mayhem until they get what they want, i.e. their body discovered, their prize possession returned, their message delivered, etc.
- Sometimes all they want is to cause pain.
- Audiences often expect there is a reason the ghost is haunting a certain place or protagonist and that it will be explained by the end of the story.



Werewolves and Vampires

- Werewolves and vampires have been sexualized.
- If your villain is one of these humanoids, you may need to remind your audience they are dangerous.
- Play up the fangs, claws, and bloodshed. Emphasize the brutal part of them if you want them to frighten.
- Play with the clichés, i.e. stakes, sunlight, mirrors, crosses, silver bullets, etc.



Protagonist

Background

- Backstory should be minimal (unless this story has a parallel storyline a la *The Haunting of Hill House* (show) or *Cricket Hunters* by Jeremy Hepler)
- **How does their backstory directly relate to what they are going through?**
- Can backstory be summarized to get the point across? (i.e. "She never liked the woods. Her brother played a prank on her and made her think their parents were dead when she was a child. Ever since then, the woods were a dangerous place.")

Occupation

- Certain careers like police or military give them strength but the tradeoff may be vulnerability/ability to relate to them.
- If they did not receive formal training due to occupation, how did they pick up the knowledge and skills that would enable them to survive in this situation? Especially important in survival horror. Were they previously in the military? Did they grow up on a farm or in the woods?



Protagonist Motivations

- Product of physiology and sociology
 - Instead of “Why are they evil?” ask “Why are they good? Why don’t they give up? Why are they the one to defeat the monster/end the curse/survive the killer?”
- Physiology: appearance, IQ, scars, strength, brain chemistry, how they dress, way of holding themselves, etc.
- Sociology: social status, family, their community, birth order, schooling, early training, experiences, events that shaped and formed their personality
 - Excellent way to show vulnerability is in their background, i.e. bullying, alienated from family, shamed for being different, etc.
 - Don't forget to give them some kind of flaw, i.e. Naïve, too judgmental, impulsive, control freak, etc.

External Conflict

This coven
has problems

External struggles are conflicts that are the result of forces outside of your character.

It can be a demanding boss, a physical illness, a snowstorm, a horde of zombies, etc.

External conflict will probably be what “sells” your story. It’s the obvious conflict. Internal conflict will be the pleasant surprise that makes your character more realistic and sympathetic.

External conflicts are usually what makes a story a horror story.

In *American Horror Story: Coven*, Cordelia struggles with her mother. Each external conflict that appears in the show, from the rival witches to the witch hunters to the Ax Man, all threaten the coven and ultimately help shape her into the leader she must become to help her fellow witches.



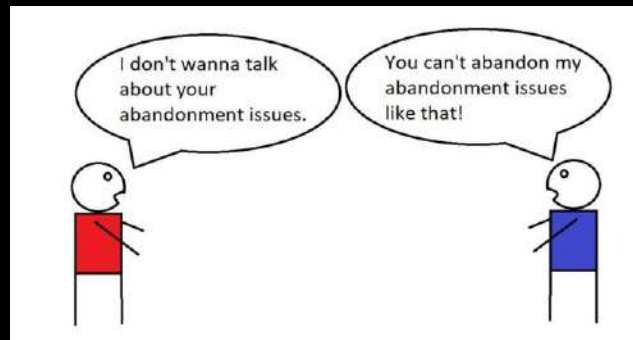
Internal Conflict

Your main character should have at least one main internal struggle in addition to an external struggle.

An internal struggle is a conflict that exists within the character, typically an emotional problem like guilt, the fear of abandonment, or trust issues.

It can also be a vice they can't let go of, like a gambling addiction or alcoholism. It can be an identity issue, such as a character trying to find out who they are or where they belong in the world.

A character that fears abandonment might suffocate their romantic partners with clinginess, or they may go the opposite route and push people away in order to avoid letting anyone get close enough to hurt them.



External and Internal Conflict

Internal conflicts and external conflicts are linked.

Internal struggles should ideally cause some external conflicts and vice versa.

There should be a synergistic relationship between the two, where the two conflicts together build each other up in a way that heightens the tension of both.

This will also increase the sense of relief the reader feels when one or both conflicts are resolved. For instance, Cordelia Goode saves the coven (external) and deals with her mommy issues (internal) in the same season.



Depicted: Mommy issues

Scare the Protagonist

In stories, our brains think that what is happening to the protagonist is happening to us. *No fear in the protagonist, no fear in the reader!*

If your POV character is bored, rectify that quickly or your reader will soon be bored.

Useful tip for any genre: Who is the main character of this scene? What is their goal? What is at stake?

How to Make the Protagonist Scared

External physical reactions

She froze.

His entire body trembled.

She covered her mouth to keep from screaming.

Internal physical reactions (within POV character)

Her heart pounded against her ribcage.

Her mind was racing.

He felt like he couldn't breathe.

Dialogue (direct or indirect)

Direct: "I'm terrified."

Indirect: "Dear God, what is that?"

Character Thoughts

Direct: *He's going to kill me!*

Indirect: She imagined him dying.

Avoid characters getting suddenly distracted while they are terrified and avoid lack of reaction. This minimizes what just happened.



Narrative Distance

Narrative Distance refers to how close or distant the reader feels from the character in a story. A protagonist watching her friend get killed would often be better in first or third person close rather than an emotionally distant third person omniscient POV. Consider revealing the character's thoughts instead of just showing actions (a combination of show and tell).

As Melissa's screams died down, footsteps echoed from the hall. He was on the other side of the door.
He kept walking. The front door slammed.
She sighed.

Adding one external reaction and three character thoughts.

As Melissa's screams died down, footsteps echoed from the hall. He was on the other side of the door.
Her heart pounded.
This is it, she thought. I'm going to die.
He kept walking. *She imagined him walking out of the house, giving her time to slip out. She willed him to leave.* The front door slammed.
She sighed.

<https://www.writingforums.com/threads/158495-Third-Person-Characterization-Distant-vs-Close>

Weapons

Work with what you got, i.e. Louis, the doctor, kills his son Gage with morphine

Symbolic/thematic weapons work well for protagonists as well as villains, i.e. the tokens in *IT*, Paul Sheldon killing Annie Wilkes with the typewriter/shoving pages in her mouth to suffocate her, etc.

Previous tip goes hand-in-hand with having a protagonist improvise, use their surroundings to fight back when plan A doesn't work.

Most people need training to be really adept at shooting.

Don't have your protagonist ditch their weapon after attacking your villain *once*. Maybe they ought to hang on to that gun/ax/etc.



Character Agency

Character agency refers to the ability of a fictional character within a story to make choices, take actions, and influence events in the narrative.

Protagonists should make decisions that affect the plot. Ask yourself if they had any control over what happens to them and the supporting characters in the story. (See handout for more information)

What are my protagonist's main goals?

What are some ideas they would realistically come up with for achieving their goals? (Consider their background, education level, personality and temperament).

Does this character's main goal change during the course of the story? What are their new goals?

How will my protagonist adjust their plans in order to reach their goals?

What is this character doing during the climax of the story? What active choices are they making?

At least she does things



Little agency



Villain/Hero Dynamic



- **Do not overpower your protagonist.** The reader should feel as though the villain is still a few steps ahead of the protagonist no matter how clever they are, or that the villain is so powerful that perhaps the protagonist's escape attempt or clever plan to stop the villain may not work.
- Protagonists with superpowers should have a weakness or the powers shouldn't be related to combat, i.e. telepathy.
- In *Nos4a2*, Vic McQueen has the ability to form a bridge with her mind called "The Shorter Way Bridge" which can take her anywhere she wants to go. It give her migraines and she risks losing her sanity the more she uses it.
- Luckily, she is paired with an equally powerful villain Charlie Manx, who remains a threat throughout the story.
- Alice from the *Resident Evil* movie series is an overpowered protagonist. In the first film, she has amnesia and is a damsel-in-distress until she discovers that she has combat training and uses it to save the day. In later installments, she develops super strength, telekinesis, and other psychic powers. She easily wipes out groups of enemies.

Villain/Hero Dynamic

In horror, the villain typically has more agency than any other character in the story. At a minimum, they often choose their victims, set up traps, and decide how to execute their victims. The protagonist may fight back or create a plan to escape, but often they are simply reacting to the villain's actions.

One exception is *Wishmaster*, where the dark genie grants wishes that are cursed, resulting in harm to whoever makes the wish. Although the villain does have some autonomy, the villain must act within the limitations of those who make wishes, and so he reacts to the protagonist and other characters in the story rather than initiating actions like most horror villains.

The idea isn't to make your protagonist's agency greater than your villain. There should be a balance, a chain of actions and reactions that will make the protagonist and antagonist feel like they are both affecting the plot. This doesn't mean they have to be on equal ground or have an equal number of victories in their struggle to defeat each other. It just means that they should both make actions that affect the outcome of the story.



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Questions

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