

# How to Craft a Devious and Nuanced Villain

Good villains make us love to hate them. These villains are the characters who actively seek to thwart our heroes, and frequently make us want to scream in the process. Sometimes the villain wins, which makes us angry (Thanos from *Avengers: Infinity War*). Sometimes the villain is a character who we as the audience can grow to care for (Loki from *Avengers*). Ultimately, a good villain is one who is portrayed so well that readers or viewers think about the villain long after the book or movie ends. But what makes a good villain? And how can you create one? Read on to find out.

***Spoiler warning:*** In this article, I will discuss the plots of many well-known stories and movies such as Harry Potter, Star Wars, and many Disney animated films. If you haven't seen or read any of these stories, I apologize for the spoilers. You've been warned.

## What makes a good villain?

Different people have different criteria for what they believe makes a good villain. Truthfully, what makes a good villain is highly subjective. But there are villains that I think we can all agree are the baddest of the bad. I will highlight just three of them here.

***Darth Vader from Star Wars***— The fierce Lord of the Sith not only looks and sounds imposing, but he acts quickly and mercilessly. He is the right-hand of the Empire and he won't let anything stand in his way. Darth Vader inspires terror wherever he goes and keeps the galaxy firmly in line.

***Voldemort from the Harry Potter series*** — The only thing Voldemort wants more than power is immortality, and he does unspeakable things in pursuit of both. His very name inspires fear, which leads to many calling him “You Know Who.” He has ruthlessly killed hundreds of people and seeks to subject all wizardkind to his rule. He has a legion of followers who do his every bidding because if they don’t, he will kill them. And worst of all: because Harry Potter has thwarted Voldemort repeatedly, Voldemort will stop at nothing to destroy the Boy Who Lived.

***Mother Gothel from Tangled***— How bad do you have to be to kidnap an innocent child and raise her as your own for eighteen years? Mother Gothel kidnaps baby Rapunzel for one reason: Rapunzel has the power of the Sun Drop and is Gothel’s ticket to staying young and beautiful forever. But what makes this villain even more nefarious is that Gothel convinces Rapunzel that she is Rapunzel’s own mother. Rapunzel believes that Gothel is keeping her imprisoned for her own good, but in reality, Rapunzel’s imprisonment is for Gothel’s own selfish desire to have the power of the Sun Drop all to herself.

### ***What makes these villains great?***

Why are all of these villains the baddest of the bad? These villains all inspire terror because of the despicable things they do, but what makes them exemplary in their villainy is their depth of character, their motivations, and their competency. They all have a reason for doing what they do, whether it be loyalty, power, or beauty. And they all are actively working against the hero by advancing their own plans, which presents a difficult challenge for our heroes Luke Skywalker, Harry Potter, and Rapunzel respectively. At many points, it seems

like these villains will win—Darth Vader presents Luke Skywalker to Emperor Palpatine, Voldemort takes over the Ministry of Magic, and Mother Gothel takes Rapunzel back to her tower with the intent of keeping her there forever. These villains are complex, developed, and present real challenges and struggles for the heroes. The result? We love to hate these villains.

## **How can you create a good villain?**

It's important to understand what makes a good villain, but it's also important to know how to craft your own villain that your readers will love to hate. Here are a few things that can help you create a perfectly despicable villain.

### ***Backstory***

Villains don't just pop up out of the snow like daisies—they have to come from somewhere. Villains, both big and small, can come from a variety of places:

- they can come from someone who fell from grace and then sought revenge (Darth Vader from *Star Wars* and Prince Zuko from *Avatar: The Last Airbender*)
- they can come from the friend who betrayed their friends for greater glory (Peter Pettigrew from the Harry Potter series and Luke Castellan from the Percy Jackson series)
- they can come from a greedy advisor who wanted to rule an empire (Yzma from *The Emperor's New Groove* and Jafar from *Aladdin*)

Each of these villains has a backstory that explains where they came from. Let's revisit Voldemort for a moment. Voldemort was once a poor boy named Tom Riddle, who was an exceptionally bright student—with a vindictive streak. Over time, that vindictive streak turns violent and destructive, and Tom Riddle changes his name to Voldemort, amasses a group of followers called Death Eaters, creates horcruxes to extend his life almost indefinitely, and seeks to eliminate all impure wizards and rule the Wizarding World. Tom Riddle didn't become the Dark Lord overnight; he became Voldemort one choice at a time over the course of many years.

Just as your hero has a journey, so does your villain. If your villain shows up out of nowhere, your readers may lose interest in your story. Your villain could be working in the shadows before his presence is revealed, but there needs to be hints that the villain is there even if he's just waiting in the wings (Moriarty in any of the Sherlock Holmes stories). A compelling villain has a story that explains how they became the villain. Mind you, this doesn't mean that the villain's backstory makes the villain sympathetic. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, readers learn a ton about how Voldemort became the Dark Lord, but at no point does Voldemort become a sympathetic villain. You can make your villain sympathetic, which is especially important if they have a redemptive arc (like Prince Zuko), but it is not required to create your villain's backstory.

The villain's backstory doesn't have to be complicated, but it should be compelling, and it should at least be mentioned in your story if it is not already built into the plot. Many villain backstories are part of the plot because the villain's backstory causes tension between the villain and the hero and contributes to the villain's motivations.

## ***Motivation***

What drives your villain to be the villain? Most villains don't wake up one day and decide "I want to rule the world today! Oh, and I want ham on my omelet this morning." Typically, villains not only have a reason for why they became the villain, but they also have a motivation for why they stay the villain.

Let's revisit Darth Vader again for a moment. Darth Vader is a vicious man who was once a poor boy from Tatooine. His backstory is tragic as he becomes Darth Vader with the fall of the Jedi Order. We understand that, like Voldemort, he didn't become a villain overnight and that a series of choices led Anakin Skywalker to ultimately become Darth Vader. But now that Anakin has become the dreaded Darth Vader, what drives him day-to-day?

If you've seen any of the original *Star Wars* films, you probably know the answer: Vader's loyalty to Emperor Palpatine is what drives his actions. Everything was taken from Darth Vader—his mother, the Jedi code, his wife, his body—all that he has left is his loyalty to Palpatine. Vader clings to that loyalty because it's all he still has. That motivation is what drives him to destroy the remaining Jedi, build a Death Star, eradicate the Rebels, and even fight his own son. Darth Vader is motivated so much by his loyalty to Emperor Palpatine that nothing else matters. His loyalty leads him to do despicable things—destroy the Jedi, build the most destructive weapon in the galaxy, and even attempt to murder his own son—all in the name of the emperor.

Now, your villain may not have a super tragic backstory, but the point is that your villain should have a reason for being the villain. They need to have a reason not only for why they became the villain, but for why they *stay* the villain. This reason makes the villain believable because readers can understand why the villain is acting villainous, even if readers don't like what the villain is doing. Your villain needs to be crafted just as much as your main character does because the villain and hero oppose each other. Both characters need to have clear motivations for your readers to be invested in your story.

### ***Active Involvement***

Villains can't be passively waiting for misfortune to befall the hero. If Voldemort had simply waited for Harry to die, not only would the entire Harry Potter series have a very boring plot, but viewers wouldn't care about Voldemort. If the villain is just waiting for bad things to happen to the hero, then they aren't much of a villain at all. If Darth Vader hadn't actively pursued the Rebels and actively tried to convince Luke to join the Dark Side, then the Star Wars films would feel flat, and no one would be invested in the galactic conflict. If Mother Gothel hadn't sought out the Sun Drop's magical healing powers, she not only would have ceased to exist, but Rapunzel's story would be drastically different. A good villain must actively pursue the hero in order to create stakes and tension in the story.

Now, there are villains who do wait patiently for the right time to implement their plans. Jafar from *Aladdin* is one of these villains. The audience never knows how long Jafar has been waiting to depose the sultan and take his place, but we do know that he has been patiently planning for years. During the actual story of *Aladdin*, however, viewers do not sit

and wait for Jafar to attack Aladdin—they see it happen on screen. Jafar is actively putting his plans into motion. Some of these patient villains sleep for a thousand years before awakening to destroy all of mankind (such as Apophis in Rick Riordan’s *The Kane Chronicles*). But all of these villains have one thing in common: the readers or viewers see them in action.

Let’s revisit Mother Gothel for a moment. Gothel tells the Stabington brothers that “Good things come to those who wait” even though she has been following Rapunzel ever since Gothel ran into the riderless horse in the woods. Gothel waits quietly until Eugene leaves Rapunzel alone temporarily before revealing herself. The conversation that follows between Gothel and Rapunzel instills doubt in Rapunzel about Eugene. This doubt ultimately leads to the climax of the movie where Rapunzel is back in Mother Gothel’s clutches. Gothel was patient, but active. And even when Rapunzel found out the truth about her heritage, Gothel did not stop trying to enforce her control on Rapunzel. Ultimately, this tension between Gothel and Rapunzel makes the conclusion of the film very satisfactory.

Like Gothel, your villain needs to be actively moving to block the hero. Maybe they’re gathering an army to fight the emperor and invade China (Shan Yu from *Mulan*). Maybe they’re trying to prevent the hero from fulfilling a prophecy the villain doesn’t want fulfilled (Hades from *Hercules*). Maybe they’re searching for the same rare artifact the hero is looking for, and they are trying to prevent the hero from reaching it first (literally every villain from the *Indiana Jones* films). Whatever the plot of your novel, your hero needs to be actively pursuing something—and your villain should be actively blocking the hero in any way possible.

## ***Personality***

Villains are people too. They have personalities and character traits other than being a villain. Sure, part of the villain's personality could be that he blasts his minions when those minions have disobeyed orders, but he could also be a charming if not a somewhat sleazy car salesman (Hades from *Hercules*). The villain could be a devious sea witch seeking to take over the kingdom who also has a hilarious sense of humor and a gorgeous singing voice (Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*). The villain could be a terrifying force to be reckoned with who is also be a caring father and a brilliant professor (Robert Callaghan from *Big Hero 6*). The point is that your villain needs to be more than just a stereotypical typecast villain twirling a moustache and looking so obviously evil.

Sometimes you may want your villain to be a moustache-twirling power-hungry maniac. That's fine, but don't forget to add uniqueness to your villain. Perhaps your villain wears an eye patch that he doesn't need, so he switches it from eye to eye, depending on the day, and forbids anyone from commenting on it. Perhaps your villain only appears for a confrontation with the hero wearing the best black dress she owns. Perhaps your villain has a secret menagerie of animals where he escapes the pressure of running a villainous campaign by visiting with his pet tigers and monkeys. Perhaps your villain has a powerhouse of a singing voice and performs karaoke for her flunkies every night.

There are multiple ways to create personality for your villains. You can make your villain serious and contemplative (Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty*), or flamboyant and charming (Ernesto de la Cruz from *Coco*). You can make your villain cold and cruel

(Emperor Palpatine from *Star Wars*), or cantankerous and crazy (Captain Hook from Disney's *Peter Pan*). Just as your main character has a distinctive personality, so too should your villain. If you don't invest time in your villain's personality, it will show in your story, and you may lose readers because the villain is not engaging.

### ***Competency***

In addition to having a personality, if you want to inspire fear in your readers through your villain, your villain should be competent. You've probably seen the villains who aren't competent. *Star Wars: Clone Wars* is filled with dozens of Separatist leaders who aren't competent, as are most supporting villains in any animated Disney or Marvel television series. While incompetence can be a funny gag, it can also detract from the story and can make the villain seem insignificant as a threat to the hero. Readers may even question why this villain is fighting against the hero because they don't cause the hero to struggle at all. At the end of the day, the incompetence of the villain prevents the hero from growing and the villain from succeeding. If the villain doesn't challenge the hero, then the villain isn't doing their job as a villain.

### ***Prepared***

A devious and nuanced villain is not only competent, but they have a master plan. They understand that the hero is smart, and so they try to outsmart the hero. These villains concoct plans that have strong chances for success. They throw everything they have at the hero—making it an actual struggle for the hero: Darth Vader captures Luke Skywalker, Voldemort wages war on Hogwarts, and Mother Gothel takes Rapunzel back to the tower.

A good example of a prepared villain is Emperor Palpatine from *Star Wars*. Emperor Palpatine had been waiting in the wings for decades, manipulating both the Republic and the Separatists in the most epic chess game ever played. He plans for *every* contingency in his ultimate quest to rule the galaxy. He never gives up because he has plans within plans within plans to fall back on. When he is finally revealed to the characters as the villain, he ultimately wins the fight and takes over the galaxy as emperor.

Prepared villains are careful, meticulous, and competent. No one could accuse Emperor Palpatine of being incompetent—he'd strike you with lightning if you said so. These types of villains are so terrifying because they present a real challenge to the hero. The hero may not win this fight, and thus the fight is gripping and keeps your readers at the edge of their seats. These kinds of villains are more believable, and they are far more enjoyable to read about because readers aren't sure if the hero will win—or if the villain will.

## **Conclusion**

Your villain gives life to your story. Without a villain, there would never be a need for a hero. If Mother Gothel hadn't kidnapped Rapunzel as a baby, Eugene Fitzherbert would not have found Rapunzel in her tower and the two of them would never have embarked on a life-changing adventure together. If Voldemort hadn't tried to kill Harry Potter as a baby, Harry would never have lost his parents or have fought the Dark Lord to save Hogwarts and the entire Wizarding World from destruction. And if Anakin Skywalker had never become Darth Vader, Luke Skywalker may never have saved the galaxy. Villains make the hero heroic. Without a well-crafted villain, your hero would be lackluster and dull. But with a well-

crafted villain, your hero shines and your readers are engaged because they want to see who will ultimately triumph.