Student Work

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Voice of the Villains: The Attraction of and Response to Villain Retellings (Part 1)

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In 2003, the musical, *Wicked,* premiered on Broadway and went on to become arguably "one of musical theatre's biggest success stories."[1] The musical, based on a 1995 book which itself is a spin-off *The Wizard of Oz*, follows the Wicked Witch of the West—except instead of the villain, she is a misunderstood heroine. The musical turns the movie *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* on its head, making the bad guys good and the good guys either bad or altogether dumb.

Wicked is not the only successful creation to re-spin popular fairy tales; since its release, other big-time companies (Disney, Sony, and Warner Bros) have recently retold their own villainous characters through film. In 2014, Disney released *Maleficent*, turning their own *Sleeping Beauty* villain into a betrayed but inherently good heroine who saves Aurora herself. In 2018, Sony released *Venom*, a movie about one of comic Spiderman's enemies. In the film, he is instead a lovable symbiote with a soft heart for the losers. In 2019, the slightly controversial film *Joker* was released, Batman's crazy comic-book rival transformed into a heavily bullied and misunderstood aspiring comedian. In 2021, Disney's *Cruella* re-told the tale of Cruella De Vil, former villain of *101 Dalmatians*, recreating her as an orphan seeking revenge on the woman who killed her mother. While the complicated villain is not a new character trope (think *Sympathy for the Devil* by Rolling Stones, or even *Richard III* by Shakespeare), such a quick string of villain retellings within leading major entertainment companies is enough to be considered a new trend within U.S. culture.

What caused an influx of such movies? And how should we, as Christians, react? To answer the second question, we must first solve the first question. In other words, we are trying to ask *why* we like villain retellings and what messages they tell us. After these questions are solved, we can discern what we, as Christians, should take away from the films.

Reason 1: We like them because they are relatable.

The first cultural aspect to look at is relatability. Some people, particularly young adults, resonated with movie villains (particularly Disney villains) even before filmmaking companies made the characters sympathetic.[2] Their identities fell closer to the sarcastic outsider than to the perfect, well-adjusted Mary Sues, even if that sarcastic outsider was ultimately evil. Take the professions of Jessica Kirker, for example, who as an adult realizes her "critical, feminist,

troublemaking self would squarely construct as a villain."[3] Now that film villain retellings fully embrace the 'countercultural,' sassy sides of these characters, adults can further embrace their resonance with them.

These remakes also give relatability to something typical heroes don't fully represent—being misunderstood. Without exception, each character within the string of villain retellings is misunderstood by the larger society and remains that way to an extent. Some main characters go as far as to say, "I wasn't for everyone,"[4] or "I pass you every day and you don't notice me."[5] Seeing a misunderstood character resonates with others who feel misunderstood by society (which in a pluralistic, diverse society like the United States, can be a lot of people). Not only would anyone who feels like an outcast find security in such a movie, but they would find justification in their otherness.

Reason 2: We like them for their modern morality.

Every story needs characters to root for and characters to root against. Since villain retellings ask the audience to root for morally questionable characters, they present even worse characters as the 'true' bad guys. For *Cruella*, this is Baroness Von Hellman; for *Maleficent*, King Stefan; for *Venom*, the Riot Symbiote and Carlton Drake, and the list continues. It seems there is a layered spectrum of badness, ranging from murder to petty theft, and if the protagonist is fighting an antagonist further down the spectrum, people feel ethically permitted to accept the retold villain.[6] This is fundamentally an ethic of perspective.

In addition to a negative counterpart, the sheer amount of time spent in the villain's perspective allows us to view them as more morally just. In modern psychological terms, this phenomenon is called "Fundamental Attribution Error," defined by "the tendency to attribute another person's behavior to their internal characteristics as opposed to the situation they are in at the time."[7] If a stranger were to shoot someone, the first ethical instinct of many is to assume the morality of that person is just as evil as the action they committed. However, if you were to shoot someone, you are much less likely to avoid assigning the morals of that action to your inner self. We see our own perspective and understand why the action was taken, whereas with a stranger, we do not see why the action was taken, and therefore equate the morality of the action with the collective morality of the person.[8] Villain retellings spend all their time in a villain's perspective, allowing the audience to bypass Fundamental Attribution Error and accept the villain's negative behavior as situational.

Reason 3: We like them for the aesthetics.

The power behind Sony, Disney, and Warner Bros allows them the budget to create stunning works of art through their villain retellings through visual design, audio quality, and/or skillful writing. In addition to using aesthetics for aesthetics' sake, each film uses the appearance of the character themselves to make villains more likable than they were in their previous movies. To

be frank, the villains get a hot glow-up. The reasoning behind why we associate this with likability is aptly described in Keen's analysis in "Rooting for the Bad Guy":

"In traditional media, the protagonist is portrayed as more physically attractive than the antagonist, leading audiences to prefer him… In current media, the protagonist of the story is also often the bad guy…Thus, when attractive villains are cast, we assume they possess more positive qualities than the less attractive good guys in the show, so unsurprisingly, we prefer them."[9]

Evidence of Disney, Sony, and Warner Bros' use of this effect is best seen visually. Compare the retold villains side-by-side to the older, more corrupt version of themselves, or simply look at the leading actors. In addition to physical attractiveness making villains more likable, studies have shown that people assign the characteristics of intelligence and competence to attractive people, but do not automatically assign integrity or empathy to them.[10] This means a retold villain's good looks help the viewer to see them as likable, smart, and competent, but also lets the viewer give them a pass in behaving positively.

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7. Keen, 130.

8. Keen, 130.

9. Keen, Richard, Monica L. McCoy, and Elizabeth Powell. "Rooting for the Bad Guy: Psychological Perspectives." *Studies in Popular Culture* 34, no. 2 (2012): 129–

    48. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23416402.

10. Keen, 135.