



WHAT MAKES VILLAINS EVIL YET FASCINATING?

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YOUNG REVIEWERS:



CAMILLA

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HS

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AGE: 15



JANE

AGE: 13

Have you ever wondered why most stories have someone cruel and mean, and why stories often seem incomplete without an evil force or villain? The story of *Little Red Riding Hood* has a big bad wolf, *Three Little Pigs* also has a big bad wolf, *101 Dalmatians* has Cruella de Vil, and the *Harry Potter* series has Lord Voldemort (“He Who Must Not Be Named!”). We are frightened by them, and we hope that they are either defeated or changed for the good. This article provides insight into the personalities of such villains. Villains may actually reflect a hidden aspect of our own personalities, and their evil traits may even represent mental health conditions called personality disorders. These disorders are actually quite common in all human societies worldwide. We will provide behavioral examples of two personality disorders, antisocial and narcissistic, in Lord Voldemort from the *Harry Potter* series.

INTRODUCTION

“[The White Witch] is a perfectly terrible person. She calls herself the Queen of Narnia though she has no right to be

queen at all ... she can turn people into stone and do all kinds of horrible things.”—*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

Whether it is Darth Vader from *Star Wars*, the White Witch from *Narnia*, or Lord Voldemort from *Harry Potter*, we are captivated and frightened by villains. In this article, we propose that villains may be understood in at least two ways in the discipline of **psychology** (Figure 1). First, according to psychologist Carl Jung, there is a dark and cruel force in everyone’s personality called the Shadow. Jung proposes that the Shadow is hidden (unconscious) in most people. Thus, our fascination with villains may come from our ability to relate to them because of our Shadow—even though we are also horrified by their behaviors. Second, modern psychologists would see villains as possibly representing two types of mental illnesses called **personality disorders**. Again, our interest in villains in stories and movies may come from the fact that these traits may lie hidden in everyone; for example, the desire to break the rules (antisocial) or to be excessively self-centered (narcissistic).

PSYCHOLOGY

The study of behavior in humans and animals.

PERSONALITY DISORDERS

Long-lasting patterns of feelings and behaviors that appear early in life and remain stable over time. They cause people great trouble in their lives, especially in relating to others.

Figure 1

Villains may be understood through at least two psychological perspectives, which summarize the way they think, behave, and feel over time and across situations.

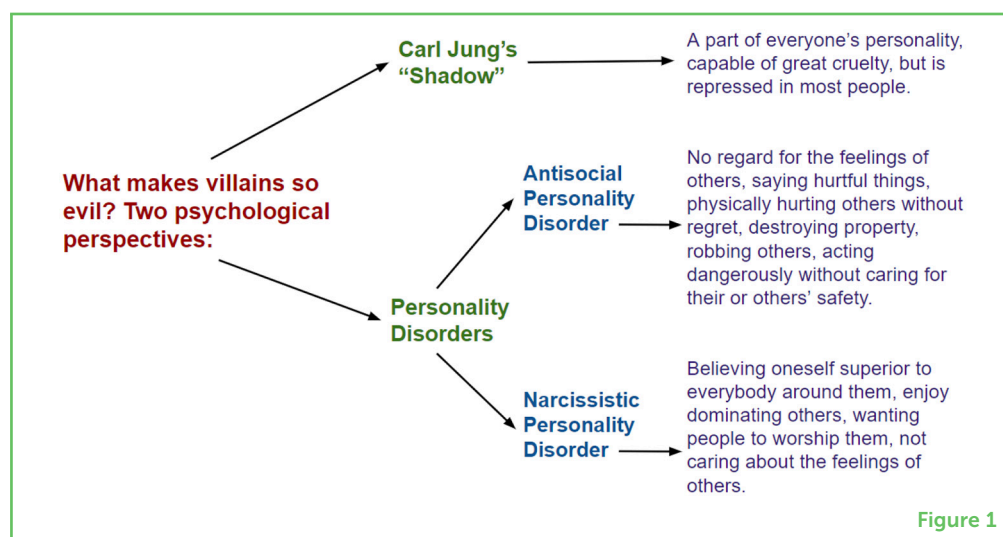


Figure 1

THE SHADOW

One explanation for our fascination with, yet fear of, villains comes from the 20th-century psychologist Carl Jung. He described the **Shadow** as a part of everyone’s personality. He thought that the Shadow was a dark and evil force capable of aggression and great cruelty. In most people, thank goodness, the Shadow is repressed or hidden. Jung also believed that the Shadow could have a positive or creative side. For example, a kind mother might lash out with great force to defend her children against a wild animal or a threatening person. Or an artist like Pablo Picasso might create a work that completely destroys traditional views of what art should be. Thus, when we are entertained by villains, Jung might hypothesize that it

SHADOW

Carl Jung proposed the Shadow as a part of everyone’s personality. The Shadow can be a dark, evil force capable of great cruelty, but it is repressed in most people.

is because the Shadow is an essential but hidden part in every person. In fact, this is the most likely explanation for young people dressing up in scary costumes at Halloween (Figure 2): they are acting out their Shadows! We might even secretly delight in seeing these cruel forces in stories and movies—we could think of villains as having their personalities dominated by the Shadow. Yet, we rarely enjoy seeing a villain winning in the end. So, what might it mean about an individual's personality when they root for the villain to win at the end of a story?

Figure 2

People love dressing up as villains at Halloween, maybe because they are acting out the Shadow in their own personalities (Image Source: Pexels).



Figure 2

Modern psychologists view villains as falling into the category of personality disorders. Personality disorders are long-lasting patterns of feelings and behaviors that often appear early in life and remain stable over time [1]. They can be passed from one generation to the next, but not always. For example, a mean father might or might not produce mean children. Personality disorders cause people great trouble in their lives, especially in terms of relating to others. In school, a personality-disordered kid may frequently disrupt the classroom by annoying or bullying others and fighting with teachers, among other nuisance behaviors. Personality disorders have a very long history. The Greek philosopher Theophrastus described people with personality disorders more than 2,300 years ago, many of which mirrored later modern personality disorders [2]. Two personality disorders are particularly important in explaining the behavior of villains: antisocial and narcissistic, both of which can be said to have elements of Jung's Shadow. Jung's view of personality came before modern ideas about personality disorders, and yet his theory provides an additional explanation for these disorders.

ANTISOCIAL PERSONALITY DISORDER

A disorder in which people have no regard for the feelings of other people. They will say hurtful things, physically hurt others, or destroy property without regret.

MUDBLOOD

A disrespectful term for magical people born to non-magical parents.

ANTISOCIAL PERSONALITY DISORDER

People with **antisocial personality disorder** [1] have no regard for the feelings of other people. They will say hurtful things and/or physically hurt others without saying or feeling sorry about it. In fact, it seems they even delight and take great satisfaction in hurting others. Some of them will even hurt animals and, again, would not feel guilty about it. Thank goodness, these antisocial behaviors in children are very rare, and nearly all children respect the feelings of others and would never harm animals or people. As adults, people with an antisocial personality disorder may destroy property (e.g., someone's house, car, etc.), steal from and rob others, and engage in dangerous behaviors without caring for their or others' safety. The murderous German dictator Adolf Hitler had an antisocial personality disorder that allowed him to torture and kill millions of people during World War II [3].

Let us relate this information to the descriptions of Lord Voldemort from the *Harry Potter* series. It is important to note that Voldemort also represents the concept of the Shadow according to Carl Jung. In the story, Voldemort was a descendant of Salazar Slytherin. Slytherin, a founder of the *Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*, was famous for his antisocial behaviors. He hated non-magical people and favored harming them (*The Chamber of Secrets*). Further, Voldemort's maternal grandfather was cruel, violent toward others, and abused his children. Voldemort's non-magical father was also mean and hated poor people (*The Half-Blood Prince*) [4]. Thus, we can see the essential meanness of the antisocial personality being passed from generation to generation, finally becoming an important characteristic of Voldemort.

"Killing **Mudbloods** does not matter to me anymore ..."—In *the Chamber of Secrets*

"I can make bad things happen to people who annoy me. I can make them hurt if I want to."—In *the Half-Blood Prince*

Known as Tom Riddle in his childhood, Voldemort bullied other children using magic and stole from them when he lived in the orphanage. Headmaster Albus Dumbledore identified "instincts for cruelty, secrecy, and domination" even when Tom was 11 years old (*The Half-Blood Prince*). Voldemort stole valuable objects and gained information from adults using manipulation, without feeling any guilt. He also broke into his father's and grandfather's houses for revenge.

Voldemort cruelly murdered people and divided his soul into pieces, creating *Horcruxes* to attain immortality. He lacked compassion. His violent and aggressive nature is visible in his fights with children and

with Dumbledore, Harry, and many others. He killed people when he found them no longer useful:

“You have been a good and faithful servant, Severus—but only I can live ... forever.”—In *the Deathly Hallows*

NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY DISORDER

The other personality disorder often seen in villains is **narcissistic personality disorder** [3, 5]. People with this personality disorder believe they are superior to everyone around them and enjoy being in charge and dominating others. They love the admiration, attention, and worship of other people. Yet, like people with antisocial personality disorder, they neither care about the feelings of others nor sympathize with other people because they can only think of themselves.

Tom Riddle’s new name, Lord Voldemort, reflects an essential characteristic of narcissistic personality disorder. He chose “Lord”, highlighting his excessive self-importance and announcing his strong desire to dominate others. Like his ancestor Slytherin, he became obsessed with his evil quest for total domination. His maternal grandfather exhibited excessive arrogance and pride because he was Slytherin’s descendant. Voldemort’s father, although non-magical, was snobbish, rude, and proud to belong to a wealthy and high-class family. These descriptions show how Voldemort would have inherited or been influenced by their narcissistic behaviors.

Voldemort believed himself superior and expected others to recognize him as such. He believed that being Slytherin’s heir made him unique and gave him the right to deserve special treatment and associate with only high-status people—not as equals but as servants, who were terrified of him! These are all classic symptoms of a narcissistic personality disorder. He changed his name to “Lord” Voldemort to cut all ties with his non-magic father of the same name. His excessive self-centeredness made him think he was superior enough to defeat death.

“You think I was going to use my filthy **Muggle** father’s name forever? ... I, in whose veins runs the blood of Salazar Slytherin ... I fashioned myself a new name ... a name I knew wizards everywhere would one day fear to speak when I had become the greatest sorcerer in the world!”—In *The Chamber of Secrets*

FINAL THOUGHTS

As we noted earlier, villains may be understood in at least two ways: as the Shadow and as having personality disorders, such as antisocial and

NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY DISORDER

A disorder in which people only think of themselves, believing themselves superior to everyone around them and enjoy being in charge and dominating others.

MUGGLE

Someone who was not born into a magical family and has no magical ability.

narcissistic. Again, part of our fascination with villains may stem from everyone's potential to commit antisocial acts, yet most people do not. Further, nearly everyone is self-loving to some extent. However, we generally find excessive self-love offensive. In this article, we saw that Lord Voldemort is an excellent example of the dark side of the Shadow and that he displayed both antisocial and narcissistic personality disorder behaviors. Now, when you read stories or watch movies, you can explore villains from at least two psychological perspectives and offer interesting explanations when your friends wonder: What makes villains so evil yet fascinating?

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YOUNG REVIEWERS



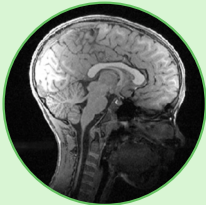
CAMILLA, AGE: 14

Camilla is 14 years-old in her first year of high school. She loves tennis, debate team, and art. She hopes to study economics and neuroscience in college and to become a lawyer. She also loves chai lattes, bubble gum, and hanging out with friends.



CARRBORO HS AP PSYCH, AGE: 15

We are high school students in North Carolina who love psychology and the brain, and love seeing how science can teach us more about life and the world. We have lots of different interests, including scientific and creative writing, literature, biology, and so much more.



JANE, AGE: 13

Hi, I am Jane! I love reading (mostly fantasy), animals, and exploring the outdoors. I volunteer at our local animal shelter and hope to study and work with animals.

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Apeksha Srivastava completed her master's degree in biological engineering from the Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India. She is currently a doctoral candidate at this institute and studied with Professor Coolidge in Colorado as a visiting researcher from April to July 2024. Her research area lies at the intersection of psychology and science communication. She enjoys science communication and writing in Hindi and English. She loves the Harry Potter universe and a true Potterhead! *apeksha.s@iitgn.ac.in



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Frederick L. Coolidge is a professor of psychology at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, USA. His research interests include personality assessment and behavioral genetics. He has published books on dreams, brains, and ancient artifacts like arrowheads, pots, and two-million-year-old handaxes. He is a renowned expert in psychological assessment, and has an h index of 62. He has published 13 books and over 180 journal articles and book chapters. He has ridden his bicycle across America (4,300+ miles; but not in one day!) and still plays guitar in rock-n-roll bands.

