

# Villains! Constructing Narratives of Evil

**Veranstalter** Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen

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Villains are not always simply agents of evil. They can represent the moral decay of a society. They can attract unexpected sympathy as misunderstood products of trauma. As symbols of revenge, they can produce a sense of justice or of closure. As harbingers of change and revolution, they can open us up to feelings of hope. This conference will have a focus on villains from historical, religious and cultural perspectives. Rather than as a subservient Other of the hero, we would like to conceptualize the villain as its own archetype.

The difficulties to define villains, their relation to heroes, and the purpose of their construction, are already visible in antiquity. The word “hero” itself derives from the Greek word *heros* (ἥρωες). A *heros* was venerated within the context of a cult, but was not necessarily a hero according to our modern understanding of the term. Instead, the *heros* could also be a villain: e.g. Eurystheus, the counterpart of the famous hero Herakles. This ambivalence persisted in history. For instance, some villains are despite their evil deeds still admired for certain elements of their character (e.g. Hannibal for his military genius). Furthermore, the villain was subject to transformation in relation to changes in societies and their underlying systems of norms and values (e.g. Prometheus, who was seen as an evildoer by Hesiod, but as a cultural hero by Aischylos). The rhetorical and philosophical exemplary traditions, on the other hand, offer more clear-cut definitions: i.e. villains are defined either by the absence of moral virtues or the presence of vices, often styled with *topoi* and stock characteristics. In these traditions, the aim of constructing narratives of evil was to learn from the evildoers’ vices.

Early Christians, too, strove to fight and oppose evil, by means of the thorough examination of its manifestations and appearances, such as demons, as well as the Devil himself. Demons already were part of the religious culture in antiquity (e.g. Xenocrates' tripartite classification of gods, men and demons). In early Christianity, demonology and the linked rituals of exorcism were not a marginal phenomenon, but played a part in shaping Christian life, faith and power relations. Many Christian authors were engaged in demonologies (e.g. Augustine or Thomas Aquinas), constructing narratives of evil, its origins and its manifestations in their present world. The Devil as ultimate villain tempted souls while hiding behind many faces: e.g. traitors, evil magicians, heretics and corrupted people thirsty of power and earthly pleasures.

During Romanticism, the lack of mortal virtues was not necessarily a problem, due to an emphasis on the dynamics of the soul. Passion, inspiration and honesty were pivotal virtues. Villains therefore often no longer functioned primarily as warnings or reminders, but instead as tragic characters who remained faithful to themselves. Villains of Romanticism, even when they were radical (e.g. insane criminals, consumed by the flames of their desires), still deserved admiration for their struggles. Specific genres (e.g. the *Schauerroman*, Gothic fiction) developed in the mid-18th century, that showed a fascination with the dark passions of their protagonists.

Such attempts to romanticize the villain can also be detected in contemporary literature and culture: e.g. criminal masterminds, mysterious outlaws, mad scientists, maniacal supervillains. This fascination has frequently been addressed in academic research. Walter Benjamin was not the only one to notice the public's general admiration for "great" criminals, figures who are remembered for defying the law ("Critique of Violence", 1921, 281). Eric Hobsbawm devoted a full study on the positive evaluation of defiant figures, including sects, the mafia, and anarchist movements (*Primitive Rebels*, 1959). More recently, Samuel Weber has suggested that "the cult of the 'outlaw'" is a result of villains often functioning as "antilegal, antistate, anticentralist agents and institutions, representing the individual and the local against the anonymous powers of the State, Big Business, and 'the Law' in general" (*Theatricality as Medium*, 2009, 121).

We invite proposals for papers pertaining (but not limited to) the following topics:

- villains of antiquity/the Middle Ages/modernity
- demonology
- villains of war and terrorism
- constructing villains in popular culture, (modern) literature, theater and film
- visual representations of evil
- villains and gender
- villains and power
- non-personal villains (institutions, groups, etc.)

We encourage young scholars, PhD and MA students from myriad disciplines and fields within the Humanities and Social Sciences, including Memory Studies, Literary and Cultural Studies, and Religious Studies, to send in their abstracts (300 words max., and an additional short bio) for 15-20 minute presentations. Please send your abstracts to [villainsconference\(at\)gcsc.uni-giessen\(dot\)de](mailto:villainsconference(at)gcsc.uni-giessen(dot)de) no later than 12 August 2018.

Call for Papers (PDF)

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