

Three-Dimensional Villains: Finding Your Character's Shadow

by Carolyn Kaufman, PsyD

If you've ever had to get up in front of a group of strangers and speak, you're familiar with the fear that you're going to embarrass yourself while all eyes are on you. Worse, all that attention seems to magnify your every quirk, and your flubs can feel like they overshadow what you get right.

Even when we're not on stage, stress makes us flounder. It's easy to live our lives according to our values and beliefs when everything is going right; it's a lot harder when we're under pressure and in the spotlight.

Carl Jung named the face we present to the world, the public façade we use to *hide* things we don't like about ourselves the *persona*. The flipside of the persona is the *shadow*, which is like a three-dimensional version of our physical shadows, packed full of things we're trying to hide, sometimes even from ourselves.

To become whole, each of us needs to *individuate*, or integrate, all of our archetypal parts into a cohesive whole. That includes the persona and the shadow.

In any story, the mark of a good villain is his ability to force your hero into the proverbial spotlight, where he will find ways to magnify and criticize the things your hero would most like to hide.

The Dark and Light Sides of the Shadow

Psychologist Carl Jung believed that in spite of its function as a reservoir for human darkness—or perhaps *because* of this—the shadow is the seat of creativity.

Author Ralph Keyes argues that most people never publish because they're not willing to find and face their shadows. Rather than acknowledge our fears about what we might find inside ourselves, we project the anxiety onto others and obsess about what *they* will think. Good writers push past the fear, Keyes says, in spite of the repercussions: "One reason so many good writers have such tattered personal lives is that they write as if they have no one to protect. Lucky for readers, not so lucky for writers."

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Recognizing Your Own Shadow

Since the shadow is, by definition, upsetting to acknowledge, we shove our awareness of it down into the unconscious. That means that the only way to truly know what's in your shadow is to think about the things that infuriate you, disgust you, and horrify you more than anything else. If cruelty just makes you sick, Jung would say that cruelty is in your shadow.

Does that secretly mean you're a cruel person? No, but it does mean you'll have an awfully hard time accepting that you really *are* capable of the kind of cruelty that makes you so sick. (And before you insist you aren't, read a bit about Phillip Zimbardo's [Stanford Prison Experiment](#).) Many, many people are riveted by true crime and serial killer stories because they give us a way to indulge the shadow without actually acknowledging that the shadow is part of us.

If you're reacting to the last two paragraphs with skepticism or irritation, you've found the feeling that means you've touched your shadow. If you can't face it, Betsy Lerner says, "you['] think you can't write, but the truth is you can't tell. Writing is nothing if not breaking the silence."

And remember: writing about it is not the same as doing it.

Finding Your Characters' Shadows

Good characters have shadows, just like you do, and your characters' shadows should repel them as much as yours do you. What that means is that channeling your own shadow through your characters will help you create the kinds of villains that have made writers famous. If Stephen King had hidden from his shadow, *The Shining* would never have been written. The same goes for lots of other famous stories. Dante's *Inferno*. Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. *The Exorcist*. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. *Frankenstein*. *Dracula*.

Exercise: Find Your Hero's Shadow (and Your Villain)

Directions

For each part, work as quickly as you can. Try not to think too much about the answers; your unconscious does better work when you're not wondering if you're doing the exercise right or criticizing the answers you come up with. You can write as many answers as you like for each part, since there is no

right or wrong number. You'll probably find, though, that coming up with at least five will help you get more out of the exercise.

Part 1. List the qualities and values that make your hero a hero.

Examples: Is he brave? Is she selfless? Does he speak his mind even when it will get him in trouble? Does she stand up for those who have no voice of their own?

- If you have trouble coming up with words for characteristics, try Sandy Tritt's Personality Components chart (scroll about halfway down the page) at <http://users.wirefire.com/tritt/tip8.html>. ↗

Part 2. List the qualities and values that make your villain a villain.

- Don't worry about your hero, or shadows, or anything else we've talked about for now. Remember, it's important to come up with *at least* five qualities or values. Again, you may find Sandy Tritt's chart helpful.

Examples: Vengeful, dishonest, power hungry

Part 3. Next to each quality or value you've written for your hero, write the exact opposite quality.

Examples: Let's say that some of your character's heroic traits are charm, intelligence, confidence, and a good sense of humor.

Ex 1. Quality: Charm - Depending on just what you imagine your character's charm to be like, opposing traits might be things like rudeness, pushiness, abrasiveness, clumsiness, or crudity.

So depending on which "opposite" feels right to you, you might put:

Heroic Trait		Opposite Quality
Charm		Rudeness
	or	
Charm		Pushiness

Ex 2. Quality: Confidence -Opposing trait possibilities might include insecurity, narcissism, fearfulness, embarrassment, or shame, which leaves you with:

Heroic Trait		Opposite Quality
Confidence		Shame
	or	
Confidence		Insecurity

Ex 3. Value: Honesty - This time we'll use a value rather than a personality characteristic or quality. Values that are in opposition to honesty might include deceitfulness or dishonesty

Heroic Trait		Opposite Quality
Honesty		Deceitfulness
	or	
Honesty		Dishonesty

Part 4. Add a Behavior

Beside the positive qualities and values you've written *for your hero*, to the right of your list of the *exact opposite* qualities you wrote in Part 3, write an example of a *behavior* (not a thought or feeling) that demonstrates the opposite (non-heroic) quality or value.

Ex 1. (Note: The examples are simple for the sake of space, but you can write as much as you like, or give examples of more than one "opposite" or "behavior.")

Heroic Trait	Opposite	Behavior
Charm	Rudeness	Telling crude jokes
Confidence	Insecurity	"Fishing" for compliments
Honesty	Deceitfulness	Burning a letter that "tells on" your character

Part 5. Compare Your Hero's Shadow (the Opposite column) to your Villain's Characteristics

Check the second list you made, the one in which you wrote down the qualities that make your villain a villain, and see if any of them match your hero's Opposite traits, values, or behaviors. Since the Opposite qualities and behaviors are your Hero's shadow, they should be personified by your villain.

If you don't see a lot of overlap, it's time to start thinking about how you can incorporate the "dark sides" of your hero's qualities into your villain. In most cases, that means you need to think of ways in which your villain can manipulate or force your hero to express or embrace the shadow qualities you've listed under "Opposite."

Villains Should Personify Heroes' Shadows

A good villain is always the dark side of your hero; the greatest danger your hero faces should be that under the right pressures and given the right circumstances, your hero could embrace the very qualities that make the villain a villain—and at some point in the story, she *should* start to do exactly that, even if she does it by accident.

If your villain's qualities are truly the things your hero hates most—especially if they scare him—he'll do anything to bring the villain down, even if that means becoming the villain. Remember, shadow qualities are the things that infuriate you the most, that make you the sickest. We're drawn to fight the things we hate, which means that your villain can become your hero's nemesis *only* if the villain's character and behavior really arouse an obsessive drive in your hero.

The Line Between Hero and Villain is Thinner than You Think

What makes the hero different from the villain, in the end, is choice: the hero chooses not to *become* his shadow, and instead acknowledges and *incorporates* his shadow qualities into the rest of his personality.

In many cases the villain *is* a fallen hero, someone who would have been just like the hero if he'd been able to resist the draw of evil. Even in real life, the more we hate someone or something, the more likely we are to become the very thing that we hate. Consider the irony of killing someone to stop murder, as in the cases of fanatics who kill doctors who perform abortion. There's irony, too, in the venom of those Christian anti-gay-rights activists who insist that "God hates gays." (So much for "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so...") Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of those rare heroes who never swayed from practicing what he preached. He believed so strongly in peace he refused to hurt others in his pursuit of it.

Consider the words of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the "father of the atomic bomb" and the scientific director of the Manhattan Project responsible for the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when he saw what his creations had done: "I am become death, the destroyer of worlds." Though some believe that the "Little Boy" and "Big Man" bombs dropped in Japan

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ended WWII, even Oppenheimer viewed the deaths as unconscionable as all the others. For years after, he was a vocal opponent of the development of more nuclear weapons.

Examples

Fiction is filled with examples of heroes and their personified shadows, some more obvious than others.

Star Wars

In the Star Wars saga, both Anakin (episodes 1-III) and Luke Skywalker (episodes IV-VI) are seduced by the Dark Side of the Force. Anakin succumbs and embraces his Shadow to become Darth Vader; he later tries to talk Luke into doing the same thing. Though Luke is tempted, in the end he not only resists but is able to redeem Anakin as well.

Lord of the Rings

In the Lord of the Rings trilogy, the Ring essentially draws each character's Shadow to the fore; Gollum is consumed by his and the evil in the Ring, and when Frodo carries the Ring, he nearly falls prey as well.

The Matrix

In the Matrix trilogy, Neo has to *become* Agent Smith and acknowledge, embrace, and overcome his own shadow to defeat the machine world.

Se7en

In the film *Se7en*, Mills not only becomes wrath, in so doing he becomes the killer he's pursued, thus falling prey to his own shadow.

The Prestige

In *The Prestige*, Angier becomes a murderer to avenge the accidental murder of his wife. (You'll notice he has to kill off his own moral side to do it.)

The Wizard of Oz

In *The Wizard of Oz*, the Wicked Witch is wicked because she wants revenge on Dorothy for killing her sister; instead, Dorothy becomes a killer by killing the witch.

Fairy Tales

Fairy tales are actually sociopolitical propaganda (see Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*), so Cinderella and Snow White epitomize the "good girl's" moral path while the villainesses epitomize the "bad girl's" path.

- Snow White: If Snow White embraced the kind of vanity the Queen did (her shadow), she could become just like the Queen.
- Cinderella: If Cinderella indulged herself in self-pity and a sense of entitlement (her shadow), she could easily become like her wicked stepsisters and stepmother.

How Heroes Fall When Villains Push

The trick to moving your hero from the side of good into the gray area between good and evil is to have your villain push your hero's proverbial buttons. Marriage is the most important thing in the world to your hero, and the very concept of divorce outrages him? The villain will try to find a way to damage the relationship by introducing temptation or doubt into that relationship.

The hero's most obvious reaction will be rage, and probably not just at the villain, but also at herself and her spouse for being affected. The more the relationship is damaged, the more hurt and anger will be involved and the less likely the couple will be to repair that relationship, which causes the likelihood of divorce to skyrocket. If the divorce happens, a part of the foundation on which the hero bases her life and identity has been destroyed, and unless she's able to acknowledge and incorporate the new, uglier parts of herself, she's on the way to becoming a villain herself.

References & Additional Resources

- Jung, Carl. [*The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious \(Collected Works of C.G. Jung Vol.9 Part 1\)*](#)
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