Creating the Ultimate Villain: An Analysis of Motives

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Whenever a hero needs an evil plan to thwart or a caper to go awry, he can count on a villain to make the stakes adequate. Male, female, mastermind or avarice-driven killing machine, villains have been making books, movies, and television shows captivating for centuries. They give the hero a reason to fight, something to overthrow, and a force to reckon with. Regardless if the story is told through drawings on stone walls or as multimillion dollar productions on 50-inch TVs, a hero cannot be a hero without a force to test their abilities. Villains have left their mark on our culture; any American knows to fear a wicked witch or that an astounding mustache twirl means evil is about to ensue. But, where have our ideas of villainy come from? To what can we owe the infamous antagonists of modern film and books?

We can look to antagonists and villains from novels from the past. Wherever there is a force of good, there has been a force of evil struggling against it, and many heroes of today could not have been able to make their mark without their malicious counterparts. Antagonists from stories told a few hundred years ago helped shape their malevolent modern descendants. Tracing back the line of villains throughout literary history can bring new focus and insight to both the literary descendent and to the literary ancestor. In this essay, the focus will be on one literary ancestor, Victor Frankenstein, the unconventional villain from *Frankenstein*, and how his character has influenced the traits and motives of two of his modern literary descendants, the Red Skull (Johann Schmidt) and Voldemort (Tom Riddle).

Victor Frankenstein fulfills a specific villain type that he would later share with his literary descendants. Orrin Klapp’s essay on villain types separates villains as being highly visible and low/delayed visible. The subsets of these two main types are overlapping as a narrative continues (338). The three villains examined in this essay not only share lineage, but they also share villain types. One type categorized as highly visible, Oppressor or Bully, is shared amongst all three characters. Klapp defines the Oppressor or Bully as a strong cruel figure who abuses power over a weak victim (338). Victor abuses his power over the creature, which classifies him as villain, according to Klapp. The Red Skull and Voldemort also abuse their power over the German people and the Death Eaters, respectively.

In *Frankenstein*, Victor unintentionally receives a dangerous education from old, outdated books on natural philosophy. Even after he is told that the books are worthless and possibly taboo, he continues his dangerous self-education toward the forbidden knowledge contained within their pages, thinking that he is on the verge of a miraculous discovery. His self-education later generates an ambition for grandeur, which molded him into an antagonist archetype that laid the ground work for some of the most infamous villains in Western culture.

During Victor’s early life, he and his family go to a party where Victor uncovers the book by Cornelius Agrippa, the catalyst of his self-education. The book enthralls Victor’s thirteen-year-old mind, and when
he shares his enjoyment with his father, he is rebuked. His father says, “do not waste your time upon this; it is sad trash.” Victor explains that he did not listen, and instead continue to pursue this man’s work. When he returned home, Victor acquired all that he could on Agrippa, and went further into the subject and found Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus. Victor admits hiding these books from his father, fearing his reaction (Shelley 22). Victor knew that the books he was reading were not “correct” and that he needed to hide this from his father, the authority figure with the most influence on Victor. His quest for forbidden knowledge began with Agrippa but would continue on throughout Victor’s life.

Victor shares that his family was “not scientific,” and he had not attended any lectures at the school. This means his education was being formed almost entirely by these three men and their quest for a dark power. His readings also begin to further dilute his mind, and give him illusions of grandeur. As shown below, Victor’s education from these three natural philosophers created a need to do great and unbelievable things. He says,

“I could banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death. Nor were these my only visions. The raising of ghosts or devils was a promise liberally accorded by my favorite authors, the fulfillment of which I most eagerly sought; and if my incantations were always unsuccessful, I attributed the failure rather to my own inexperience, and mistake” (Shelley 23).

Victor’s words display an incredibly important character flaw, which is the goals he created after his self-education through forbidden knowledge. His ambitions are forming, and clearly they aspire to very lofty heights considering many of these are not even possible with modern medicine. Curing the body of all disease, crafting an immortal being, and later when he gives life to a lifeless body are all attributes of a divine being or god, something that he seeks to become. He also possesses a desire to conjure ghosts or devils, things that are commonly portrayed as evil or dangerous. Possessing such grand goals would eventually lead Victor to his own destruction, but not before he becomes capable of fulfilling one of these insane ambitions.

Victor’s self-education of forbidden knowledge continues to lead him. At seventeen, Victor goes to Ingolstadt, a university where he begins a more formal education through M. Waldman and M. Krempe’s lectures. Both men seek to dissuade Victor’s ideas about Agrippa and company, but the things Victor learns in the formal educations only fan his flames, specifically when the lectures focus on the decomposition of the human body. This leads him to graveyards and other locations to study the dead more closely, something that he continues to hide from friends, family, and his professors because he knows the taboo his is breaking. However, the self-education of his past as well as the wealth of knowledge Victor seems to possess cannot allow him to stop before one of his goals, creating an ideal species, is fulfilled.

Eventually and after numerous attempts, he discovers how to animate the flesh of these dead bodies that he has been collecting, which means he is in the process of achieving his overreaching ambitions. He says to Walton, “when I found so astonishing a power placed within my hands, I hesitated a long time concerning the manner in which I should employ it” (Shelley 33). While this may appear almost
as if Victor is questioning what the responsible manner of action is, he is astounded to finally hold the spark that will ignite the fire he’s been building his whole life. Further narration in the story supports this idea.

After he discovers the ability to animate flesh, Victor’s narration becomes quicker and more erratic. Mary Shelley intentionally placed the narration in this way to mimic the frenzy Victor was feeling after his discovery. The culmination of his desires is upon him, and he knows that he can finally attain an almost godlike status. He debates over a simple creature or a creature like himself, finally deciding upon something wholly different. To Walton he says,

"a new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of their child so completely as I should deserve their’s”

(33).

The passage shows the depths Victor has followed his dangerous self-education to find forbidden knowledge. He will follow through with this overreaching ambition. And now that he has found it, he seeks a grand application on which to use it. The creation of a new species, the production of an ultimate race qualifies as an illusion of grandeur and also as the line between Victor’s motivations being sane and insane. But, this great deed he seeks to perform now that he has his forbidden knowledge is not only mastery over death but also to be as powerful as a god. And while he does create life from death, the results were not what he desired. The product of his ambitions, while critically important within the novel, does not matter in this examination of his motives. The motivations that drove Victor to seek out the knowledge required to create the creature were greed and the need to become exalted. Without these motivations, Victor could never have made his descent into villainy. The absence of these motivations would have made a different mark on modern literature because Victor’s motivations are what would pass down to his literary descendants.

Forbidden knowledge, a dangerous education, and an overreaching ambition are the most powerful facets when creating a truly deplorable villain that will compel readers and viewers. A popular villain from the twentieth century who still remains relevant today, Johann Schmidt, has central motivations identical to those of Victor Frankenstein, making Schmidt one of Victor’s literary descendants.

Johann Schmidt would eventually go on quite a few horrific killing sprees and commit unnumbered evil plots in the Tales of Suspense with his only stumbling block being Captain America. But before Johann adopted the Red Skull as his new name and persona, he was just an orphan boy in Germany before WWII. In Johann’s early life, his mother died during his birth, causing his father to attempt to kill Johann before taking his own life. Johann is taken to an orphanage, which he later runs from at age seven. From then on, he leads a life of petty crime and holds down various odd jobs. No one is available to offer him companionship or to guide his self-education (Lee 47). Johann leads a life on the street, learning an almost feral take on survival and living. Unlike Victor who had a father figure to act as an authoritative force, Johann did not. However, both boys do share a lack of this authoritative force. For Victor, he hides his books from his father and therefore removes that force from his education. Johann doesn’t have a figure present in his early life, creating this deficit,
and also leaving a crucial space inside his life.

During his teens, this space gets filled when he meets Adolf Hitler at a hotel during the Nazis’ rise to power. There, Hitler takes an interest in Johann, and Johann becomes the newest recruit. Johann’s lack of authoritative force prepared him for Hitler’s influence and his type of education because Hitler does not simply sweep the boy over to a commanding officer but instead seeks to train him personally. Johann’s education and goals are greatly influenced by Hitler. Hitler is also the one that gives Johann his unique uniform with a horrific mask and dubs him “The Red Skull” (Lee 50).

Since Hitler was the first person to take an interest in Johann, he become a crucially important figure for him and had a huge influence on his education. Unfortunately, Hitler’s education doesn’t leave much room for anything else besides a lust for power, greedy ambitions, and a desire for an ancient power. In the panel, Hitler’s aggressive and angry life views are apparent, and history has proven how deep his lust for power and control ran. Johann’s transformation from vagrant thief to international terrorist was totally facilitated by Hitler’s education. Just like Victor, Johann stumbled upon an unknowable viper nest. Neither Johann or Victor began their lives with the intentions to become villains. They both were transformed over time by their motivations. Both Johann and Victor pursue desires and needs created from their dangerous educations, which further isolates them and feeds their desires for great power.

In the movie, Captain America: The First Avenger, the audience is introduced to the Red Skull while he is seeking the Tesseract, a powerful cube from another planet that he plans to use as a power source for world domination. In the opening sequences of the film, a man caring for and protecting the Tesseract warns Schmidt of what could happen if he continued to seek out this forbidden knowledge and ultimate power. Schmidt’s motivations from Hitler’s self-education can only be fulfilled by seeking out the Tesseract and harnessing its power. In the comics when the Red Skull receives the Tesseract, he says that he finally has received the power that he has been seeking (Lee 54). It also shows the great desire he has to control and manipulated such a huge font of power.

Hitler’s influence on Schmidt and the education that he gave him were what would escalate the Red Skull’s desire for power beyond measure. The Red Skull sought out the Tesseract to please Hitler at the start, but the power was too great to share with his former mentor. Hitler’s dangerous education created the ideal circumstance for the Red Skull’s quest for forbidden knowledge in the Tesseract. Later, the Red Skull would form H.Y.D.R.A., his own personal militia that was separate from Hitler’s, further showing his desire to control the ultimate power alone. Like Victor Frankenstein, the Red Skull sought out the most dangerous and powerful element for himself, a desire that for both men was facilitated by their educations. The motivations driving the Red Skull are incredibly similar to Victor’s motivations.

Both men’s motivations were influenced and created from their education. Victor’s education through taboo books brought about his quest to create a new species, just like Johann Schmidt’s education from Hitler caused his quest to use the Tesseract to achieve ultimate power. Without their educations, both Victor and Johann would have likely never sought out their own forbidden knowledge. Victor would not have
been consumed by the thought of creating a species that would owe him their love and fealty, and Johann would have never sought to overthrow one of the most powerful and cruel tyrants in the world. Victor motivations set up the model that the Red Skull would eventually follow, making him not only an intriguing villain for modern readers, but also Victor’s literary descendant.

Another literary descendant of Victor Frankenstein is Tom Riddle, from the *Harry Potter* series. Tom Riddle’s parents were both deceased, leaving him an orphan (*Chamber of Secrets* 244). This creates an absence of an authoritative force in Tom’s life just like the lack of a positive authoritative force Victor and Johann have. Tom ends up in an orphanage for most of his young life, leaving this absence of the authoritative force to be filled through a passive woman overseeing the orphanage and Tom’s own demons. His wizard’s powers make him different from other children, and this means that he sees himself as separate and superior from them. When Dumbledore tells Tom that he’s a wizard and his special talents are really magic, Tom is overwhelmed with excitement and says, “I knew I was special. Always, I knew there was something” (271). Tom’s self-education created a distinct barrier between himself and other people. By saying that he knows he’s special, he’s acknowledging that he sees himself as above them. Tom’s self-education would also propel him forward into his quest for forbidden knowledge.

While attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Tom learns about Horcruxes, a taboo black magic that lets a wizard place of piece of their soul into an object. This fracturing makes the wizard immortal because part of them still lives on outside their body, so even if their body is destroyed, the person can still live on. To create a Horcrux, the wizard must first “tear their soul,” meaning that they must kill a person (*Half Blood Prince* 497). The conventions of creating a Horcrux made them taboo, not only to create them, but even talking about them. This cannot assuage Tom Riddle. He refuses to let this matter elude him and continues to seek out how to create one, even after a professor pleads with him to let the matter drop (498). A Horcrux within the *Harry Potter* world is perhaps one of the most taboo ideas inside forbidden knowledge.

Tom’s forbidden knowledge is the Horcrux and it stems from his motivations gained through his self-education. At the very core, the Horcrux would allow Tom to become exalted and godlike. His other ambitions, including seeking to control the entire wizarding world, would be facilitated through his powers gained from forbidden knowledge. In essence, Tom intends to use his forbidden knowledge to accomplish his overreaching ambitions. Tom’s motivations behind his actions are the same that led Victor to create the creature and Johann’s search for the Tesseract. Victor’s influence as a literary ancestor helped shape Tom Riddle into the kind of villain that he is, making him one of the truly vicious and terrifying characters in the books.

Victor, Johann, and Tom all went on from their dangerous educations, whether it was a self-education like Victor and Tom or a mis-education like Johann’s, to make infamous deeds and choices. Victor’s discovery of outdated, dangerous scientific material magnified his yearning for his personal forbidden knowledge, reanimation and bestowing life, and granted him an access point for his need to possess exalted abilities. For Johann, the absence of an authoritative force made him susceptible to
Hitler’s dangerous education. The Tesseract, Johann’s forbidden knowledge, would grant him godly powers and combine with his overreaching ambitions to overthrow Hitler and control the world himself. Tom’s lack of force, like Victor and Johann, left him a self-education of arrogance and greed, which made seeking out his forbidden knowledge, the Horcrux, incredibly easier and logical to him. He too sought after powers reserved for gods alone. His combination of education and forbidden knowledge left him primed for no other life than an infamous villain, just like Victor and Johann.

Victor’s actions throughout Frankenstein compel readers to turn pages, make them angry, and also make them question their own motives and choices—the true goal for any proper villain. But, more importantly, Victor’s basic personality and character structure gives future writers a fantastic model to follow. Victor Frankenstein serves as an archetype of a villain, but even more important, an interesting and compelling villain. His influence upon future antagonists helped create many of our most feared “bad guys”. Without Victor as a literary ancestor, the Red Skull and Voldemort would have incredibly different traits, personalities, and motivations. What is more important though, by identifying Victor as a literary descendant, we can establish new models for evaluating and analyzing antagonists in subsequent works of literature. Victor’s literary ancestors can also assist readers in defining and evaluating Victor. The duality of a literary lineage should never be over looked. Just as the past can help readers understand the present, the present can help modern readers gain better insight to literature of the past.

Works Cited


