

How do you create a good villain as a screenwriter?

Writing an effective villain is one of the most important aspects of screenwriting, especially in the horror genre. The villain is the driving force of the narrative, and its presence is immense. The role of a villain in a horror film is not only to create conflict but also to embody the anxieties and terrors that the film explores. As a screenwriter, I aim to write villains that are both terrifying and nuanced, providing a balanced mix of mystery, revelation and excitement. This essay will explore how I approach writing horror villains, particularly focusing on how much of the villain to show. The question of when to reveal the villain, how to build suspense around them, and what motivates them will be explored in depth, drawing from horror classics such as *Nosferatu*, *The Thing*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

Throughout this essay, I am going to critically evaluate the role of the villain in horror, examining how the genre has shaped my approach to writing these characters. I will analyze the very delicate balance between mystery and exposure, drawing on examples from film history to illustrate how effective villains are often those whose identities and motivations are carefully unveiled. I will also discuss the impact of the villain on the protagonist's development, showing how the villain can be used not just as a physical threat, but as a psychological element that pushes the protagonist toward change. By examining these elements, I hope to provide insights into how I, as a screenwriter, craft villains who are both compelling and terrifying.

In horror, one of the most powerful tools for creating fear is a sense of mystery. The less the audience knows about the villain, the more space they have to imagine the worst. The fear of the unknown can be far more terrifying than anything that is explicitly shown. A villain who is kept in the shadows, only hinted at through glimpses or mentions, is often far more effective than one who is fully revealed. This idea of withholding information is something I consider crucial when writing a villain. For example, in *Nosferatu* (1922), Count Orlok's true nature is not fully revealed until the latter part of the film. Until then, his presence is felt more than seen, and the audience's fear stems from what they don't know about him. His figure, seen mostly in shadows or from a distance, creates an air of suspense and dread, leaving the audience to imagine the full extent of his evil.

Similarly, in *The Thing* (1982), the alien creature is never truly revealed in a conventional sense. Instead, it takes on a shape-shifting form that makes it difficult to understand fully. As the film progresses, the characters, and therefore audience, are forced to deal with the terror of not knowing who is human and who is the alien. The constant uncertainty about the villain's identity plays a significant role in building tension and fear. The alien is not just a creature to be defeated; it is a representation of paranoia, mistrust, and the fear of the unknown. By limiting the audience's understanding of the villain, the film keeps the tension high and ensures that the threat never feels diminished.

In my screenwriting, I try to apply this approach by gradually revealing aspects of the villain over time. This allows me to build suspense, allowing the audience to feel the growing presence of the antagonist without fully knowing what they are up against. I believe that the more the villain

remains a mystery, the more terrifying they become. The reveal of the villain, when it does happen, should be carefully timed, and it should serve to heighten the sense of fear rather than diminish it. A villain that is constantly revealed or over-explained loses its power because it no longer allows for the audience to fill in the blanks with their own fears.

While mystery is crucial, there is also a danger in keeping the villain too hidden for too long. A villain who remains completely unknown can lead to a lack of investment in the narrative. Horror villains need depth and purpose; they shouldn't just be faceless threats. The audience must understand, at least on some level, why the villain is doing what they're doing. If the villain remains a total mystery for too long, it can lead to frustration rather than fear.

A great example of the dangers of overexposure can be found in the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise. Freddy Krueger, introduced as a terrifying figure in the original 1984 film, was initially a mysterious and menacing antagonist. However, as the sequels continued, Freddy became more of a recognizable figure, with his catchphrases and comedic elements making him less of a threat and more of a pop culture icon. As Freddy's backstory and personality were explored in greater detail, the fear he initially inspired diminished. What made Freddy so terrifying in the beginning was the uncertainty surrounding him, the idea that he could attack you in your dreams, and you would have no control over it. As his character became more exposed, the horror element faded, and he became a fixture of the franchise rather than the force of fear he once was.

In my own writing, I aim to avoid this by ensuring that the villain retains their mystery even as the story progresses. I try to withhold key details about the villain's backstory or motivations until it serves the story. By keeping the villain's full nature hidden until the climax, I can maintain the sense of fear and suspense that is essential in horror storytelling. This does not mean that the villain is entirely absent or irrelevant to the plot; rather, it means that the audience should be kept on edge, unsure of exactly what they're dealing with until the time is right. Overexposing a villain can make them feel more like an old friend than a legitimate threat.

An effective villain in horror is not only a physical threat but also a psychological one. The best villains are those who reflect the protagonist's inner fears, desires, or flaws. This is something I consider crucial when writing horror villains, as it adds layers of complexity to the story. The antagonist should challenge the protagonist not just in terms of physical danger but also on a psychological level.

In *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Buffalo Bill is not just a psychopath who kidnaps women, but a reflection of Clarice Starling's own struggles with her past. Through her interactions with Hannibal Lecter, she confronts her own trauma and emerges stronger by the end of the film. Buffalo Bill, though a terrifying figure, represents the horror Clarice faces within herself. His motivations and actions trigger a series of events that force her to confront her own vulnerabilities, making her eventual victory over him a personal triumph. This aligns with Pinedo's (1997) argument that horror often functions as a space for protagonists to confront repressed fears and unresolved trauma. The villain, in this case, becomes a catalyst for the

protagonist's character development, and the horror comes not just from the external threat but from the internal journey the protagonist undergoes.

Similarly, in *The Shining* (1980), Jack Torrance's descent into madness is mirrored by the haunting presence of the Overlook Hotel. The supernatural elements of the hotel are linked to Jack's alcoholism, his inability to connect with his family, and his struggle with his past. The villain is not just a supernatural entity but an embodiment of Jack's inner demons. The horror in *The Shining* comes from Jack's unraveling mental state, which is aggravated by the hotel. In this way, the antagonist is not just a monster to defeat but a reflection of the protagonist's internal struggle. Even while there are actual scary creatures throughout the film, they are never the primary antagonist.

In my own writing, I aim to create villains who challenge the protagonist on both a physical and psychological level. The villain should force the protagonist to confront their deepest fears or flaws, and in doing so, further their development. The antagonist's actions should be more than just an obstacle to overcome; they should push the protagonist toward change. This dual threat, the external danger and the internal conflict, creates a richer, more engaging narrative.

While horror villains are often primarily viewed as external threats to the protagonist, I believe a well-crafted villain should always have a deeper purpose. A villain must serve the narrative beyond simply being an obstacle to the protagonist. The antagonist should drive the plot, push the protagonist into action, and force the development of the story. This purposeful role allows the villain to have a lasting impact on the story, rather than being a disposable or secondary character whose main function is to generate conflict.

Take *The Thing* (1982) as an example again. The alien in the film is not just a creature to be hunted down or destroyed; it represents a much deeper fear: the fear of identity loss and the dissolution of humanity. The alien's ability to take on the form of any living creature means that the characters can no longer trust each other. The film's true horror comes from the idea that anyone could be infected, and no one is truly safe. In this way, the villain in *The Thing* is not just a monster; it's a representation of the fear of the unknown, of losing one's sense of self, and of being betrayed by those closest to you. The stakes in the film are not just about survival; they are about maintaining one's identity and humanity in the face of an overwhelming threat.

Similarly, in *Hereditary* (2018), the villain is not a single character, but a combination of family trauma, grief, and supernatural forces. The antagonist's presence haunts the protagonist, forcing them to confront the horrifying reality of their family's past. The fear in *Hereditary* is not just from the supernatural elements but from the psychological unraveling of the characters as they uncover painful truths. The antagonist's impact on the protagonists is not only physical but emotional and psychological as well, showing how a villain can push characters to their limits and drive their growth.

This psychological element of the villain's purpose is something I strive to incorporate in my own screenwriting. The villain should not simply be a force to fight against but a force that compels the protagonist to confront something within themselves. For example, if the protagonist is a

deeply insecure individual, the villain might represent their fears of inadequacy or failure. If the protagonist is struggling with guilt, the villain could embody that guilt in some way, forcing the protagonist to address their inner turmoil. By linking the villain's actions to the protagonist's internal conflict, I can ensure that the antagonist's presence is felt throughout the narrative, not just in the form of physical danger.

In *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), Freddy Krueger is more than just a dream killer. He represents the fear of childhood trauma, of repressed memories that resurface in terrifying ways. Freddy is the physical manifestation of the protagonist's deepest fears: the inability to escape one's past and the horror of returning to the darkest moments of childhood. This deeper psychological connection is what makes Freddy such a compelling villain, especially in the original film. His impact on the protagonist's psyche elevates him from a simple slasher villain to a more complex character whose presence lingers even after the physical danger has passed.

In contrast, as the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise progresses, Freddy becomes more of a comedic, almost cartoonish figure, losing much of the psychological depth that made him frightening in the first place. This shift is what ultimately undermines Freddy's effectiveness as a villain, as he moves from a psychological embodiment of fear to a more traditional antagonist. His ability to scare diminishes as the focus shifts from his psychological depth to his one-liners and over-the-top kills. This aligns with Clover's (1992) argument that horror villains risk losing their potency when they shift from symbolic figures of fear to exaggerated spectacles. This serves as a cautionary tale for me as a screenwriter, as it shows how easy it is for a villain to lose their potency when they are no longer serving a meaningful psychological or thematic purpose.

Another critical aspect of writing a villain is determining when and how much of their backstory to reveal. While it's important to avoid over-exposing the villain too early, it's equally important to give the audience some understanding of why the villain does what they do. A villain without clear motivation or reason for their actions can often feel hollow or uninteresting. Their actions may seem random, and the threat they pose might lack any real weight.

In *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), the villain Buffalo Bill is given a backstory that helps explain his motivations, even though his actions are horrific and unexplainable on a human level. The audience learns about Bill's troubled past, his obsession with transformation, and his desire to create a new identity. This backstory doesn't excuse his actions but allows the audience to understand them, which makes him all the more terrifying. By revealing enough about Bill's past, the film adds layers to his character, making him more than just a psychopath. His actions feel driven by a sense of desperation, and the audience can see that he believes what he is doing will ultimately fulfill some need within him. This kind of complexity is what I strive for when developing villains in my own writing.

The *Halloween* (1978) series offers an example of how not to reveal too much about a villain's backstory. Michael Myers, though a terrifying figure in the first film, loses much of his mystique in later installments when his past is explored in more detail and especially in the Rob Zombie remake films. The more we learn about his childhood and the supposed reasons behind his

actions, the less frightening he becomes. In the original *Halloween*, Michael is the embodiment of pure evil and his motives are never fully explained, and that sense of mystery is what makes him so unsettling. By keeping his backstory vague, the film leaves room for the audience to project their own fears onto him. When the sequels attempt to explain Michael's motivations, they weaken his character and reduce his ability to terrify.

I believe that a villain's backstory should only be revealed when it serves the story and the theme. If the villain's motivation is clear from the beginning, there's little point in dragging it out. However, if the villain's backstory adds to the psychological complexity of their character, it can be revealed gradually throughout the film. This approach helps maintain the sense of mystery while also giving the audience the satisfaction of understanding why the villain behaves the way they do. Ultimately, the goal is to balance the need for exposition with the desire to keep the audience in suspense.

Movies throughout history have handled these villains in a variety of ways, as explained. We see how even from the 1920s all the way through to the 90s and 2000s that writing a villain can be a serious challenge. Villains can be shaped by audience perception and desire to see more, alongside the need to have an antagonizing force for the lead character. I want to be able to tell real stories with terrifying antagonists that don't feel forced or contrived.

In conclusion, writing an effective horror villain requires a delicate balance between mystery and presence, depth and restraint. Through careful exploration of iconic characters like Freddy Krueger, Count Orlok, and Buffalo Bill, I have examined how a villain can serve as both a narrative catalyst and a psychological force that challenges the protagonist. By ensuring that a villain's motives are clear yet not overexposed, and by making their actions integral to the protagonist's growth, I can create villains that are both terrifying and meaningful. Ultimately, the key lies in understanding the purpose of the villain beyond their role as an obstacle, recognizing that the most effective antagonists are those who haunt the audience and push the protagonist to confront their deepest fears. As I continue to hone my craft as a screenwriter, I aim to create villains that stay with the audience long after the film ends, not just through their actions but through their emotional and psychological impact on the story and its characters.

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