

Villains:

(Re)presentations of the Bad Guy

Bridgett Orgain

Introduction

Children's movies are filled with two key ingredients: heroes and villains. While the subject of heroes has been frequently addressed in elementary curriculum (Alvermann & Hagood 1999), the idea of villains has not been thoroughly explored or included in elementary curriculum. In the same manner that heroes help normalize what is considered good and right, representations of villains determine what is bad and wrong. Within the genre of villainy, there exist stereotypes of villains as evil, old (Robinson & Anderson 2006), and queer (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe 2003). Students need to critically engage with the genre of villains to recognize those stereotypes.

In the lower elementary grades, students are also becoming a part of school culture. Already they understand the difference between good and bad behavior as defined by teachers, principles, and parents and are constructing their identity according to these hegemonic rules. A reinvestigation of villains is an opportunity for students to participate in transgressive pedagogy (Duncum 2009) and experience permutable identity (Richards 2007) – even the identity of the “bad guy”. Within the school culture, good and bad are presented as binaries. This curriculum on villains allows students to see that there are often shades of gray in-between.

Villains: the good, the bad, the ugly

In the simplest form, the villain is the bad guy – the antithesis to the hero. However, the stereotype of villain as evil has been played out so often that a new bad guy has come on to the scene. In the words of Wreck-It Ralph, “I'm bad, and that's good. I will never be good, and that's not bad. There's no one I'd rather be than me” (Spencer & Moore, 2012). A bad guy that isn't a *bad* guy is the premise of several blockbuster films within the past few years, such as *Wreck-It Ralph* (Spencer & Moore, 2012), *Megamind* (Breay, L., Cascino, D. N., & McGrath, T., 2010), and *Despicable Me* (Cohen, J., Healy, J., Coffin, P., & Renaud, C., 2010). These movies suggest the villains are

misunderstood instead of evil – victims of their situation that aren't all bad. As Marriner (2011) describes, “Far from one dimensional baddies, the self-styled sinister protagonists in these films are intriguing and complex characters who look meaner than they really are” (p. 16). These misunderstood villains fall between the binaries of good and evil and are ideal examples of a moral gray.

Other movies have recognized the new metanarrative of the misunderstood villain. In *The Incredibles* (Walker & Bird, 2004), the villain Syndrome once idolized the main character Mr. Incredible and tried to be his sidekick. When he is rejected by his idol, Buddy Pine grows up to be the evil mastermind Syndrome. This is in contrast to a long line of Disney villains that give no background history or reasoning for the villain's evil ways. It is a realistic approach to villains, making them more human and relatable to the audience. These believable baddies are characters that children can empathize with, making meaning and connections for their own misunderstood actions.

While the archetype of villain has been reinterpreted in recent media, the stereotypes perpetrated by Disney villains continue to hold strong. Classic Disney movies are an integral part of any complete childhood library of movies. A particularly disturbing stereotype that permeates the long line of Disney films is the villain-as-sissy, in which feminine qualities are vilified, particularly in men (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003). Heroes represent heteronormal behavior, which can only be defined through the understanding that villain behavior is somehow deviant or queer. Li-Vollmer and LaPoint (2003) warn “Although sexual orientation may not yet be pertinent to children's social schemata, they may develop early negative associations with sissy traits that could feed into stereotypes of gays later in life” (p.105).

The villain-as-sissy stereotype is based on physical representations, actions, and dialogue. Disney villains are portrayed in cool colors like blue and purple, often with painted eye lids. Not only is Hades from *Hercules* (Dewey, Tobin, Clements, & Musker, 1997) blue from head to toe, he wears a long robe that questions the gender underneath. Villains move about the scene with minimal body movements. The only big gestures are made with their finely manicured hands. Females and villains are the only characters to possess long fingernails in Disney films.

They say effeminate things, such as Scar in *The Lion King*, “Oh, I shall practice my curtsy” (Allers, Minkoff, & Hahn, 1994). *Curtsey*, a feminine word, used in place of the masculine *bow* is a “transgressive use of language” (Li-Vollmer & LaPoint, 2003, p. 102). Everything about the representations of Disney villains is womanly and queer.

Another damaging stereotype is the representation of villains as old characters. In their study on the portrayal of older characters in children’s animated television programs, Robertson and Anderson (2006) found that students entering school already held negative stereotypes about older people:

When animated programs portray certain groups of people in a consistent, unvarying manner or stereotype them, children begin to believe that the images they see are acceptable and normal. Even though the largest percentage of older characters in this study were positive, there were enough negative images and characteristics that children are learning at a young age (as early as 12 months) that older characters are of little importance to the programs; that they are portrayed as angry, senile, and crazy; and that they are often the villain. (p. 298)

These negative stereotypes are visible in Disney villains as well. In Disney’s first animated film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Disney & Hand, 1937), the story deviates from the original Grimm fairy tale to have the Wicked Queen transform into an ugly, old witch (Nelson, 1978). It was a decision that would set the precedent for the majority of Disney villains to be drawn as old. The stigma of old age as villainous affects not only how children view older people but how they interact with them as well.

Transgressive Behavior: Let’s be the bad guys.

In lower Elementary grades, students have a grasp on moral reasoning and know that the “protagonist ‘should feel bad’ after a moral transgression” (Malti & Keller, 2009, p.595). These binaries of good and bad are made very clear in the school setting. Transgressive behavior

from the student is actively discouraged and avoided within the classroom setting (Duncum, 2009). Logue and Detour (2011) concluded in their observations on “bad guy” play:

Too often, dramatic play themes are chosen by adults to allow children to practice safe, familiar roles (e.g., community helpers, housekeeping), while the emotionally engaging themes involving the struggle between good and evil, and courage in the face of danger, are actively discouraged, especially when the play script involves bad guys. (p. 14)

When they allowed transgressive “bad guy” play to occur naturally, they observed children developed complex play interactions, including “high levels of cooperation, consideration, impulse control, memory, and planning” as well as “levels of sustained attention, playful negotiation, cooperation, and inclusive play among the children” (Logue & Detour, 2011, p. 14).

Allowing transgressive behavior through a villainous permutable identity is important because it “enables students to explore the many facets of their personality, to act out roles, and to toy with social prohibitions, without risking consequences such as exclusion” (Richards, 2007, p. 27). The identity of bad guy is one they will toy with on their own. Pushing buttons and limits is a natural childhood behavior to learn boundaries. However, this behavior carries unwanted consequences for the child that could be avoided through a pedagogy that allows transgressions as part of learning.

In Alvermann & Hagood’s (1999) curriculum on Superheroes, students constructed the ideal superhero from parts of existing superheroes. This led to critical reflection and growth on the part of some students, specifically the student Chris who was able to express fears about death (p. 49-50). Visual narratives based on villains have the same potential for personal critical reflection by challenging the binaries of good and evil. While it is easier to label and define all things, people, and actions as either good or bad, the reality is not so black and white.

By allowing students to take on the role of the bad guy, the pleasure of transgression is acknowledged (Duncum, 2009) and the opportunity for students to reflect on their decision making as well as the decision making of others is presented.

Conclusion

Throughout this unit, students will reflect on popular culture texts that utilize the archetype of villain, negative stereotypes, and ideas of good vs. evil. Furthermore, they will explore mutable identity by participating in visual narrative activities that reinvestigate the villain, including taking on the role of villain themselves. In preparation for their final visual narrative, they will learn about character design and the use of storyboards to develop a story. Their final project will be to construct a full visual narrative around a new villain that (re)presents what it means to be the bad guy using their design and conceptualizing skills. The goal for students while they are exploring representations of villains is to recognize associated stigma and acknowledge normalized behavior through the *villainous other*. In a time where children are trying on new identities as often as they grow out of shoes, it is important to allow them to take on the role of villain and challenge binary ideas of good and bad. It is through challenging ideas that personal growth and understanding can happen.

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Curriculum Unit Theme: Villains

Teacher: Bridgett M. Orgain

Grade Level: K-3

State Visual Art Goals: VAK-1.1, VAK-1.3, VAK-3.1, VAK-3.2, VAK-6.2, VA1-1.1, VA1-1.3, VA1-1.4, VA1-3.1, VA1-3.2, VA1-3.3, VA1-6.2, VA2-1.1, VA2-1.3, VA2-1.4, VA2-3.1, VA2-3.2, VA2-3.3, VA2-6.2, VA3-1.1, VA3-1.3, VA3-1.5, VA3-2.4, VA3-3.1, VA3-3.2, VA3-3.3, VA3-6.2

State Media Arts Goals (if any): MAK-3.3, MA1-3.3, MA2-3.3, MA3-3.3

State Language Arts Goals (if any): K-4.1, K-4.2, K-4.3, K-5.2, 1-4.1, 1-4.3, 1-5.2, 1-6.5, 2-4.1, 2-4.2, 2-5.2, 2-6.5, 2-6.6, 3-4.1, 3-4.2, 3-5.2, 3-6.6

General goals for the curriculum (describe in 2-5 sentences):

- By teaching this unit, I would like for my students to critically engage with popular culture texts that utilize the archetype of “villain”. Through a reinvestigation of “villain”, they will explore stereotypes, ideas of “good vs. evil,” and permutable identity.
- Students will learn about the design process of creating characters and stories
- Students will use a the media of their choice (pencils, crayons, color pencils, paint, glue, pastels, etc) to create their own characters and visual narratives

Lesson Title (name each lesson to reflect a general unit theme)	Visual Exemplars (list specific images and artists, TV shows, and/or books that you plan to use for each lesson)	Motivation / Dialogue (list basic issues and questions to be explored during classroom dialogue and any other motivational strategies that you plan to use for each lesson)	Media / Process (list artistic processes that your students will engage in during each lesson)	Concepts and/or Design Principles to be learned during each lesson	Closure/ Assessment (list an assessment strategy used for each lesson)
Lesson 1 What is a villain? <i>(one class)</i>	None. This is to avoid a list of characteristics that describes the examples. Characteristics should describe the genre of villains and not any specific villain.	A. Issues -Definition of villain -Stereotypes of villains B. Discussion Questions -What is a villain? -What do villains look like? -Are there more female or male villains? -Are villains evil? -What makes someone become a villain? -Are villains just in stories? -What are characteristics of a villain? -How are villains different than heroes?	-Students will verbally create a list of characteristics to describe villains to write on the board -Student will choose 3 characteristics to make a drawing from -Students will draw a villain using the descriptive words they chose Materials -9"x11" paper -Pencils, crayons, markers, color pencils	-Students will begin to understand that character traits can be represented through drawing -Students will understand that villains are drawn with a specific set of characteristics (i.e. sneaky, evil, unhappy, old, scary) Vocabulary -Villain -Hero -Evil -Good	-Were the students able to describe characteristics of villains? -Did the student draw a villain? -Did the student incorporate the 3 characteristics they chose or did they draw an existing villain?

<p><i>Lesson 2</i> Comparing Villains to Heroes <i>(one class)</i></p>	<p>A. Comparisons of Disney villains to their heroes -Governor Ratcliffe vs. John Smith (<i>Pocahontas</i>) -Hades vs. Hercules (<i>Hercules</i>) -Jafar vs. Aladdin (<i>Aladdin</i>)</p>	<p>A. Issues -Representations of Villains and Heroes -Stereotypes of Villains as “sissy” B. Discussion Questions -How can you tell who is the villain and who is the hero? -Why do the villains wear long robes instead of pants? -Do the heroes wear makeup? -Do the villains? What colors do the villains wear? The heroes? -Are villains as masculine as heroes? -Is this a stereotype?</p>	<p>-Students will verbally describe the differences in visual representations of Disney heroes and villains -Students will draw a villain that breaks out of the stereotype of “sissy” Materials -9”x11” paper -Pencils, crayons, markers, color pencils</p>	<p>-Students will understand that the portrayal of villains as less masculine than heroes is a stereotype Vocabulary -Stereotype</p>	<p>-Was the student able to verbally identify the visual differences between the representations of villains and heroes? -Was the student able to draw a villain that broke the stereotype of sissy villain?</p>
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<p>Lesson 3 Not so evil anymore (one class)</p>	<p>A. Trailer for <i>Despicable Me</i> B. Clip from <i>Megamind</i> (the scene from Megamind's childhood growing up in prison)</p>	<p>A. Issues -Villains as misunderstood instead of evil -Breaking stereotype of good vs. evil B. Discussion Questions -How did they become villains? -Are Gru and Megamind bad guys? -Do they deserve to be called villains? -If Megamind hadn't grown up in a prison, would he still be a villain? -Is Megamind insecure? -Are they evil or just misunderstood? -What other villains are just misunderstood?</p>	<p>-Students will (re)present an existing villain as misunderstood instead of just evil Materials -9"x11" paper -Pencils, crayons, markers, color pencils</p>	<p>-Students will learn about the character type "antihero" -Students will draw a visual narrative about how their favorite "evil" villain is just misunderstood Vocabulary -Supervillain -Antihero</p>	<p>-Was the student able to pick their favorite villain? -Was the student able to (re)present that villain as misunderstood and not wholly evil? -Was the student able to narrate this story through visual and/or verbal means?</p>
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<p>Lesson 4 Villains as old (one class)</p>	<p>A. Female Villains -Ursula (<i>The Little Mermaid</i>) -The Queen/Hag (<i>Snow White</i>) -Maleficent (<i>Sleeping Beauty</i>) B. Male Villains -Jafar (<i>Aladdin</i>) -Hades (<i>Hercules</i>) -Governor Ratcliffe (<i>Pocahontas</i>) -Judge Frolo (<i>The Hunchback of Notre Dame</i>)</p>	<p>A. Issues -Representations of villains as old and ugly -Representations of female villains as witches and hags B. Discussion Questions -What do these villains have in common? -Are female villains concerned with beauty? -Are male villains concerned with beauty? -How would you describe old people? -Were these characters villains when they were younger? Why do you think they became villains? In what ways are the younger versions of these villains different?</p>	<p>-Students will describe common characteristics of example villains -Students will pick an old villain and draw their younger versions Materials -9"x11" paper -Pencils, crayons, markers, color pencils</p>	<p>-Students will recognize the stereotype of villains as old</p>	<p>-Was the student able to identify the commonalities among the examples? -Was the student able to reimagine a villain as young? -Was the student able to describe how the younger villain was different, either verbally or written?</p>
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<p>Lesson 5 Why be a villain? (one class)</p>	<p>n/a</p>	<p>A. Issues -Transgressive behavior as a part of us all -Why we bully</p> <p>B. Discussion Questions -Are there villains in real life? -Have you ever been the bad guy? -Have you ever been bullied? -Have you ever done something that you knew was wrong, but thought was fun? -If you could do something “bad” and not get caught, what would you do? -When has someone been bad to you? -Have you ever been bullied? -Have you ever bullied someone else? -Why do you think they were bad? -Did they look like a villain or did you know they were a villain from their action?</p>	<p>-Students will draw a visual narrative in which either they were the bad guy or someone was bad to them -Students will describe the motivations for being bad</p> <p>Materials -9”x11” paper -Pencils, crayons, markers, color pencils</p>	<p>-Students will reflect on why they have been “bad” in their own life -Students will reflect on the “bad guys” in their life, perhaps a bully or sibling</p> <p>Vocabulary -Bullying</p>	<p>-Was the student able to think of an example when they have been bad? -Was the student able to assume the role of the “bad guy” through dialogue or visual narrative? -Did the student’s visual narrative show an understanding of motivations for being bad?</p>
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<p>Lesson 6 DIY Villain (one class)</p>	<p>n/a</p>	<p>A. Issues -Creating their own villain B. Discussion Questions -Do you want to be a villain? -What physical traits will let us know that your character is a villain? -Are actions more important to being a villain than appearance? -Does your villain have a secret lair? Family? Minions? Arch enemy? -What is your villain's story? -Why are they a villain?</p>	<p>-Students will draw their own villain -Students will draw their villain's family, hide out/secret lair, sidekick/minions, arch enemy Materials -9"x11" paper -Pencils, crayons, markers, color pencils</p>	<p>-Students will use a variety of drawing media (pencil, crayon, color pencil) to illustrate their villain -Students will think about each visual aspect of their villain, from head to toe -Students will reflect on their use of stereotypes to convey characteristics of villains</p>	<p>-Was the student able to draw an original villain and not copy an existing villain?</p>
<p>Lesson 7 Character Design (one class)</p>	<p>A. <i>The Little Mermaid</i> special edition DVD -concept artwork in extras -different versions of Ursula</p>	<p>A. Issues -Character Design B. Discussion Questions -Why do artists draw multiple versions of a character? -Is the final design of Ursula the best? -What clothes will your villain wear? -What colors will you use?</p>	<p>-Students will draw 3 versions of either their own villain (see DIY Villain) or an existing villain Materials -9"x11" paper -Pencils, crayons, markers, color pencils</p>	<p>-Students will understand the character design process -Students will reflect on how changes in the physical representation of their villain can change the personality of their villain Vocabulary -Character Design -Concept Artwork</p>	<p>-Was the student able to draw 3 versions of the same villain? -Was the student able to identify stereotypes they used (age, gender, etc)?</p>

<p>Lesson 8 Storyboarding (one class)</p>	<p>A. Storyboard drawings from <i>Aladdin</i> B. Storyboard drawings from <i>101 Dalmatians</i> C. Kingdom Hearts manga (graphic novel)</p>	<p>A. Issues -Visual Narratives -Storyboards -Comics/Manga/Graphic Novels B. Discussion Questions -How do artists tell a story without words? -Are storyboards and comic books more effective than words?</p>	<p>-Students will draw 3 or more thumbnail scenes using their villain -Students will arrange and rearrange their scenes into storyboards and graphic novel progressions</p> <p>Materials -5"x6" paper -Pencils, crayons, markers, color pencils</p>	<p>-Students will understand the use of storyboards to show a scene progression -Students will understand importance of placement</p> <p>Vocabulary -Storyboard -Comic book -Manga -Graphic novel</p>	<p>-Was the student able to draw 3 or more consecutive frames? -Was the student able to arrange those scenes in a progression that made sense?</p>
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<p>Lesson 9 Creating the Story (three classes)</p>	<p>A. Previous drawings -Each student will examine their own body of work to pick a villain to expand upon B. Cover artwork -<i>Wreck It Ralph</i> movie poster -<i>Despicable Me</i> logo</p>	<p>A. Issues -Telling a Visual Narrative -Cover artwork B. Discussion Question -How will you choose which villain to create a full story for? -How do movie posters and books covers convey who the main character is? -Do you get a sense of Ralph's personality from the movie poster? -How do you know that <i>Despicable Me</i> is a movie about a villain from just the movie logo?</p>	<p>-Students will draw 8 or more 5"x6" frames to illustrate their villain's story -Students will fully illustrate each frame with color -Students may include text -Students will paste each frame into a blank book in a logical progression -Students will draw their story cover -Students will paint the final version of their story cover on a blank book</p> <p>Materials -blank book -5"x6" paper -Pencils, crayons, markers, color pencils, paint</p>	<p>-Students will construct their final visual narrative -Students will rely on the knowledge they learned on character design and storyboarding</p> <p>Vocabulary -Cover Art</p>	<p>-Was the student able to flesh out a villain and story? -Was the student able to design a cover for their book? -Was the student able to draw all the frames of their story? -Was the student able to put the frames in their book in a logical progression?</p>
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<p>Lesson 10 Sharing Our Stories <i>(one class)</i></p>	<p>n/a</p>	<p>A. Issues -Reflection B. Discussion Questions -Read and/or describe your story -What does your villain look like? -Is your villain evil or an antihero? -Did you use any stereotypes? -Is there anything you would change?</p>	<p>-Students will share their stories by either reading the text they incorporated and/or describing the scenes they illustrated</p>	<p>-Students will reflect on the choices they made in character design and story -Students will answer questions about their villain and story to further reflect on visual choices</p>	<p>-Was the student able to create a complete narrative? -Was the student able to recognize stereotypes? -Was the student able to identify their choices in their villain's appearance and story?</p>
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Lesson #3**Title:** Not So Evil Anymore**Grade:** K-3**Teacher:** Bridgett M. Orgain**Length:** One class period (45 minutes)**State visual art goals:** VAK-1.1, VAK-1.3, VAK-3.1, VAK-3.2, VAK-6.2, VA1-1.1, VA1-1.3, VA1-1.4, VA1-3.1, VA1-3.2, VA1-3.3, VA1-6.2, VA2-1.1, VA2-1.3, VA2-1.4, VA2-3.1, VA2-3.2, VA2-3.3, VA2-6.2, VA3-1.1, VA3-1.3, VA3-1.5, VA3-2.4, VA3-3.1, VA3-3.2, VA3-3.3, VA3-6.2**State media arts goals (if any):** n/a**State language arts goals (if any):** K-4.1, K-4.2, K-4.3, K-5.2, 1-4.1, 1-4.3, 1-5.2, 1-6.5**Objectives:**

- Students critically engage with popular culture texts that utilize the archetype of “villain”.
- Students will challenge binaries of “good vs. evil
- Students will learn about the character type “antihero”
- Students will draw a visual narrative about how their favorite “evil” villain is just misunderstood

Concepts and vocabulary:

- *Supervillain* - A fantasy fiction criminal or evil-doer, often with supernatural powers or equipment, in popular children's and fantasy literature who can present a credible challenge for a superhero
- *Antihero* - A central character in a story, movie, or drama who lacks conventional heroic attributes, such as idealism and courage

Teacher materials:

- Trailer for *Despicable Me*
- Clip from *Megamind* (the scene from Megamind’s childhood growing up in prison)

Student materials:

- 9”x11” paper
- Pencils, crayons, markers, color pencils

Procedures (detailed step-by-step description including dialogue):

Introduction (10 minutes)

- After students have entered and are seated, the class will watch the trailer for *Despicable Me*.
- Through teacher guided discourse, the class will describe the plot and characters of the movie.
- The class will watch a clip from *Megamind* that shows his childhood growing up in a prison.
- Through teacher guided discourse, the class will describe the plot and characters of the movie, with a focus on Megamind's childhood.
- Students will learn what a supervillain is.
- Student will learn what an antihero is.

Discussion (10 minutes)

Students will answer questions to challenge the stereotype of villains as evil.

- How did they become villains?
- Are Gru and Megamind bad guys?
- How are Gru and Megamind similar? Different?
- Do they deserve to be called villains?
- If Megamind hadn't grown up in a prison, would he still be a villain?
- Is Megamind insecure?
- Are they evil or just misunderstood?
- What other villains are just misunderstood?

Activity (15 minutes)

- After the discussion, students will choose a villain to (re)present as misunderstood instead of evil. Their choice cannot be an existing antihero villain, such as Wreck-It Ralph
- Students will be given paper and a selection of drawing tools to draw their selected villain in a visual narrative that explains the motivations for their bad guy ways
- Students may include text if they are so inclined, but it is not a requirement of this activity

Closure (10 minutes)

- Students will share their drawing with the teacher and give a brief verbal explanation of their representation

Assessment/Closure:

- Was the student able to pick their favorite villain?
- Was the student able to (re)present that villain as misunderstood and not wholly evil?
- Was the student able to narrate this story through visual and/or verbal means?

Learning center/ back up activity (if any):

- If the student does not have a favorite villain, they can invent their own villain with a back story for that villain.
- If the student cannot imagine their own villain, they can draw Gru or Megamind as children and narrate other struggles their antiheroes faced.