



## Antagonists

By

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In the previous article we discussed heroes, so in this one we will consider villains. Except, of course, these terms aren't sufficiently descriptive to encompass the true nature of these roles in fiction. That is why professional writers prefer "Protagonist" and "Antagonist" when referring to the main characters in a story. As we have learned, the protagonist is the character with whom the reader identifies. It is through the protagonist's eyes that we, the audience, view the action and through the protagonist's emotions that we obtain our own feelings about events that are taking place in a story.

If the protagonist is the character the readers are in sympathy with, then what is the antagonist? As the name implies, the antagonist is the character for whom the readers are expected to feel antipathy. He's the bad guy, the Simon Legree, the evil one who is doing harmful things to the good guys. He's the villain of the piece, the person we boo. The story is supposed to be about the hero, or protagonist. Yet, there is a quirk in the human psyche that often requires the antagonist to be the strongest character in the story.

Consider if you will the following imaginary scene from a cold war espionage film. The hero-spy has been caught by the East German border guards, who have him tied to a chair with a bright light shining in his face. The evil Russian colonel has just arrived on the scene to interrogate our hero, who has been roughed up by the toady East German guards. To illustrate my point, I will write the villain's dialogue in *italics* and the hero's words in **bold**.

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*"Well, my dear James Beam, I see that we have you in our clutches at last. Would you like to save yourself a great deal of pain and tell us where the microfilm is now, or would you like to suffer an hour of torment before telling me what I want to know?"*

**"Screw you!"**

*"Come now, my dear Mr. Beam. No need for us to be uncivilized about this. After all, I have a wife and child at home in Moscow whom I must return to. I so hate torture. It seems somehow unprofessional. Now do be a good chap ... no, that is what our English friends would say, no? ... Be a sport and tell me where I might find those files you stole from us."*

**"Go impregnate your mother, Alexandrovitch!"**

*"Tch, tch. How crude of you to bring my mother into this. I have not made a single comment regarding your beautiful wife and what she may or may not have been*

*doing in that motel room last spring when we three met in Washington, now have I? No reason why we need to mention our families, is there? In fact, if you tell me what I want to know, I think I can guarantee that you will be with your family within the week. All it requires is a few minutes of cooperation. After you tell me where to find the film, you can go back to being your usual uncommunicative self. In fact, I will clear the room of guards if you like. No one need witness our conversation, or hear of it later.”*

**“No deal, you poor excuse for a transvestite!”**

*“Then you leave me no choice, Mr. Beam. We will have to proceed with ... shall we say, more primitive methods? A pity. That handsome face will likely not survive the coming ordeal. Heinz here is a master craftsman with a scalpel!”*

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Don't concentrate on the words. Concentrate instead on their pattern. In every case you have the Russian colonel, the antagonist of the piece, being suave, debonair, and reasonable. He delivers long speeches in which he comes across as the very model of decorum. His lengthy entreaties are punctuated periodically by staccato bursts of rudeness from the protagonist, James Beam.

Is it any wonder that most actors prefer to play the villain? If nothing else, look at how many more lines the villain has. In most stories, the villains are usually the most interesting of all the characters. They have to be. The reason for this is that the antagonist is often the human embodiment of the problem the protagonist must solve, the main foil off which our hero must play. And no one must ever win easily in fiction. To do so is to eliminate the entire concept of dramatic tension from your work. In fiction, as in life, the truly meaningful victories are those that are hard fought and narrowly won.

In 1990, as the Gulf War was becoming a very real possibility following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, my wife expressed intense concern that it would be a blood bath for the United States. She predicted hundreds of thousands of body bags being returned home from the slaughter. I, on the other hand, was far more sanguine. Having spent my life building components for the aircraft that would be first to engage the Iraqis, I pointed out that a contest between an army optimized to fight World War I and another optimized to fight World War III would be no contest. It would be a slaughter, all right, but an Iraqi slaughter rather than one for the U.S. and its allies.

History proved me correct. If you believe some of the more lurid reports, the casualties on the Iraqi side were nearly a thousand times greater than on the coalition side. In fact, had it not been for one lucky shot by a Scud missile late in the war, the coalition allies might have ended the conflict with the number killed in double digits.

Yet, to hear the media tell it in those days during which troops poured into Saudi Arabia, you would have thought that the Iraqi Army was the reincarnation of Genghis Khan's Mongol horsemen and Erwin Rommel's Afrika Corps. Part of this was the necessary psychological buildup to war, of course. When you are at war with someone, it is no time to be reasonable.

However, part of the emphasis then on just how powerful and evil Saddam Hussein truly was comes directly to us from the requirements of fiction. This is because it is no longer enough for the news people to merely report the facts in the modern world. Each story has to be developed into a small morality play, with its protagonists (us) and its antagonists (them). This tendency to demonize one side or the other of every issue is the result of 40 years of watching television. We are conditioned to receive our

information in small chunks in which there are heroes and villains, beginnings and resolutions. The complexities and shades of gray that exist in the real world are difficult to convey in a 40 second television report, so mostly reporters don't even try. Instead they tell a very short story or play.

The Gulf War still plays well on our cable television screens because it is a war that we won handily, and because there is a lot of videotape available for people to watch while the talking heads make their point. In fifty years or so, however, it will be relegated to the same status as the Spanish-American War. To the men who charged up San Juan Hill, that was a real war. To the rest of us, however, it was more a comic opera war, a conflict where the victors barely worked up a sweat. In another generation or so, the Gulf War will be remembered in the same light, when it is remembered at all.

This is because the human competitive spirit is such that we savor our victories in direct proportion to the effort we expend in achieving them. Thus, the American Civil War and both world wars are remembered because they were prodigious efforts, titanic struggles in which the combatants invested everything. Or, as an earlier generation put it so well, "They risked their lives, their property, and their sacred honor..." They risked all and won big.

That is the way it must be in fiction. And if the hero of the piece is going to risk all, then the villain of the piece must be supremely powerful. That is why antagonists are usually the strongest characters in a story. Villains aren't wimps! They can't be if the heroes are to be perceived as ... well, heroes!

There are a number of schools among writers as to how antagonists should be constructed in fiction, and as many nuances concerning their handling as there are writers. That will be the subject of the remainder of this article.

### Snidely Whiplash and Company

Although novels have been written since Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the modern novel is largely a product of the 19th century. Writers like James Fennimore Cooper (in the United States) and Charles Dickens (in England) perfected the basic structure and conventions of the novel. These conventions are still in use today. This is not to say that conventions have not changed since the 19th century, but rather, that they have not changed so much that we cannot recognize *A Tale of Two Cities*, or *The Deerslayer*, as modern novels. Fashions in novel writing change at about the same speed as fashions in men's clothing. These, too, were stabilized in their current form in the early nineteenth century and are still basically a variation on the same theme.

Most of the changes that have taken place involve the sophistication of the reader, which has presumably risen due to the better education system we possess in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (I say "presumably" because you can probably get an argument on whether our education system is better or worse in any bar in town.) In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was permissible for the writer to take a chapter or two to lovingly describe the small town in which the story takes place. No longer. The motto for modern novelists is "shoot the sheriff on the first page, and then accelerate the action from there!"

One other convention of 19th century literature that has not fared well in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is the use of the melodramatic villain. You have all seen portrayals of turn-of-the-century melodramas in which the black coated, mustachioed, sneering villain

is busily tying the heroine to the railroad tracks as the 5:15 Express is barreling toward her. Usually you see these things in cartoons, or played as comedies, as in Blake Edward's excellent *The Great Race* (made in approximately 1964). Almost never do we modern writers resort to such crude characterizations for our villains!

(If you believe that, there's a bridge in Brooklyn I would like to sell you.)

Actually, the pure melodramatic villain of the old 19th century play is indeed dead, but there still remains a school of writing that tells writers to make their villains as black-hearted as you can. I refer to this as the "Snidely Whiplash School of Writing," and personally I don't care for it, but perhaps you do.

Some examples:

In *Dune*, one of the most successful science fiction novels of all time, the villain is Baron Harkonnen, a bloated figure of a man with a bad complexion and a worse attitude. He is evil incarnate. He sleeps with young boys (*Dune* was written at a time when this was generally frowned upon), kills people on a whim, and orders the destruction of entire populations. His motivation for doing this is that he is evil. In effect, he does villainous things because that is his function in the piece. After all, he *is* the villain.

A more recent example involves *Lethal Weapon II*, the least successful of the series. In this movie Mel Gibson and Danny Glover are fighting the evil South Africans in the days of apartheid. There was nothing good about these people. Their leader was, like Snidely Whiplash and Baron Harkonnen, just plain evil. He smuggled drugs, called black people *kaffers* (if you don't know what that means, I'm certainly not going to tell you), tried to murder the heroes, did murder Mel Gibson's love interest, and executed his own underlings without a trace of emotion. The South Africans were portrayed as bad, Bad, BAD!!!

And, of course, in most Hollywood portrayals of the Nazis, there is little if any modulation in the characterization. They are evil people through and through. While this characterization has the advantage of historical accuracy, it is not the most effective method for writing antagonists.

The problem with the Snidely Whiplash school of writing is that the villains tend to be one-dimensional characters. As in the case of *Dune*, they do evil things because that is their function in the plot. Rather than being portrayed as people, they are portrayed as objects or functions.

This is not to say that you can't have evil people in your books. Lord knows there have been a large number of truly evil people in this life: Adolf Hitler, Adolf Eichmann, and Ted Bundy. However, they weren't unrelievedly evil. I'm sure that Adolf Hitler appeared quite charming to many who knew him, that Adolf Eichmann loved his mother, and that Ted Bundy could enchant you if he wanted to, and in fact, that was how he obtained his female victims -- by enchanting them.

Thus, in any story involving one of these three monsters, the writer will find himself or herself well served by spending some time in modulating their characterization. Showing the human side of the villain makes their evil side all the starker. An excellent example of this technique is Gregory Peck's portrayal of Dr. Mengele in *The Boys from Brazil*. He seemed such a nice old man, except of course for the part where he was a conscienceless monster!

The Villain as Hero

One of the best pieces of advice I have ever received as a writer is that “the villain should think of himself as the hero of the story.” In other words, the antagonist of a piece of fiction isn’t necessarily a bad person, but rather one with motivations and interests that are diametrically opposed to those of the protagonist.

Having been to Russia seven times in the past several years, I find that I enjoy the character of the Russian people. They are open and straightforward in their dealings with others, they have a good sense of humor, and they care deeply about their friends and families (perhaps more so than Americans).

Yet, for some seventy years, Russians and Americans faced each other across a world-spanning barrier, preparing for a conflict that could well have incinerated the human race. In that time both sides engaged in a series of dirty tricks, outright opposition, and a string of regional wars against one another. The Russians sent the equipment that killed several of my classmates in Vietnam, and we provided Stinger missiles to the Afghan rebels to blow hundreds of Russian airmen out of the sky.

It wasn’t that the people engaged in this conflict were evil, just that their interests were diametrically opposed. Having spent quite a bit of time in Russia, I have had to ponder this question quite a lot. I have concluded that our opposition to Communism didn’t have as much to do with economics as it did with our fear of Joe Stalin’s army. After all, my parent’s generation saw approximately half the planet recede behind the Iron Curtain in the space of five years. You can understand why that frightened them so. Today, I am fond of saying, “Several of my best friends are communists, or rather, ex-communists!”

It is one of those dramatic statements we writers are so fond of uttering. Besides, it’s true.

There is an entire school of literature devoted to our struggles against one another in The Cold War. In many of these books, the Russians are portrayed as evil people (as I am sure that Americans are portrayed in the counterpart Russian literature). Yet, the fact that we can both write books about the same events with our own side as the protagonists and the other side as the antagonists indicates how one’s self interest largely determines which side they root for. Or, as a sage once said, “Where you stand on any issue largely depends on where you sit.”

Personally, I believe that an antagonist is much stronger if he is an ordinary human being who does his antagonizing out of his own interest rather than because it is just his function to be evil. In other words, in the villain’s own mind, he is the hero of the piece, fighting for what he considers to be important.

But how then do you tell the protagonists and the antagonists apart?

Simple. You make sure that whatever goal the villain is striving for is one that the reader will not be in sympathy with. For example, the antagonist may have many sterling qualities. He may be brave, suave, charming to women, and kind to young children and dogs. But his goal is to maintain the purity of the Aryan race. That makes him the villain rather than the hero.

As I have noted before in this series, one of my favorite books is Herman Wouk’s *The Winds of War*. In the book, Victor Henry (played by Robert Mitchum in the TV miniseries) is serving as military attaché in Berlin before the United States’s entry into

World War II. There he meets a number of Germans who are quite charming and is invited to a banker's country estate for a weekend of hunting. In the middle of all of the festivities, the banker invites Captain Henry to a political discussion where the Germans start complaining about the influence of Jews in America. Suddenly these reasonable people are shown as the villains they truly are. The contrast between their manners and their beliefs is so striking that the whole passage sends a powerful message to the reader. It says, "Look, dummy, they may be rich, well dressed, and witty; but they're also a bunch of *damned Nazis!* You aren't supposed to like them."

Most readers get the message and come away with a deep, abiding distaste for that particular point of view. Those who don't probably wouldn't be caught dead reading *The Winds of War* in the first place.

### Hurricanes and Earthquakes

It is not necessary that the antagonist in a story be human, or even alive. There are many good stories written where the struggle between the protagonist and antagonist is the struggle between man and nature. In one of the later shorter stories in C. S. Forester's *Horatio Hornblower* series, Hornblower ends his service as governor of Jamaica and books passage home for himself and his wife, the Lady Barbara, on a packet (a 19th century passenger ship). There are no human villains in the piece. The voyage is uneventful and pleasant until the hurricane blows up.

Most of the story is about Hornblower's struggles to stay alive through what then becomes known as Hornblower's Hurricane, and then to be rescued following the aftermath of the storm. The struggle is not against an evil human villain, but rather an uncaring nature that tries to snuff out the hero's life and that of his beloved.

Such "nature as antagonist" stories are common. In 1997 alone, we had at least two movies about volcanoes and one more entry into the long line of *Titanic* films. And in 1998, comets and asteroids deluged the Earth. This entire genre of movie has become known as "disaster films," and their popularity indicates just how effective it can be to make Mother Nature, the villain.

### Villains and Their Flaws

As we learned last article, every protagonist must have a flaw that he or she must overcome in the process of solving the problem or conflict of the story. The villain need not have an inner flaw, although giving him one can make him more human. The reason why villains do not require inner flaws is that they come equipped with a set of external flaws. The antagonist's belief system, which has antagonized the reader, also carries within it the seeds of the antagonist's destruction.

Again, let us draw on those handiest of all villains, the Nazis.

Adolf Hitler founded the Third Reich in 1936 and confidently predicted that it would last a thousand years. In fact, it barely lasted for 3000 days. Why? Because Nazism carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. When you start invading other countries to add to your total land area, you tend to stir your neighbors to action against you. Had he been a little less blatant in his enthusiasm for obtaining *lebensraum* (living space), Hitler might have gotten a good deal farther with his plans. As it was, he

managed to forge an alliance against him consisting of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Josef Stalin -- as unlikely a trio of bedfellows as has ever existed. In fact, by all rational measure, Stalin was a bigger monster than Hitler. Yet, the United States gave him billions in war materiel to fight the Germans on the theory that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” (And no, I’m not defending Hitler. The two men are by far the leaders in any “who was the worst human being who ever lived?” contest.)

So when you write your villain, make him as strong as you can and then strengthen him some more. The challenge for your hero must be prodigious. Indeed, it must be at the very limits of his abilities and endurance. Yet, because the antagonist has beliefs with which the readers are not in sympathy, there needs to be a weakness inherent in those beliefs, a weakness that eventually leads to his downfall.

Darth Vader’s embrace of the “dark side of The Force” has soured his soul to the point that he will switch sides just as the emperor is about to throw Luke Skywalker into the plasma pit. Baron Harkonnen’s piggish behavior and double dealing in *Dune* have left him without true allies. He is forced to rely on lackeys who will abandon him should they get the chance. The western villain’s vanity leads him to holster his gun after obtaining the drop on the hero, and then lose the resulting quick draw contest.

The difference then between the hero and the villain is that the hero is able to surmount his flaw in the final act, and the villain must succumb to his. For within every antagonist lie the seeds of destruction. Those seeds begin to grow the moment they are planted by the author. They grow progressively larger until, finally, they overcome a character that had seemed invincible.

At the very height of the climax, with the knight in shining armor all battered and bloodied, the black armor of the villain suddenly develops a telltale crack somewhere on its surface and the hero’s lance finds that flaw unerringly. Thus it has always been and thus it must always be, at least until human beings evolve into something else.

I doubt very much that any of us will still be actively writing when that happens, so don’t worry about it. Spend your time making your villains believable, for they are just as much your children as your heroes.

The End

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Three hundred years after humanity made its deal with the Life Probe to search out the secret of faster-than-light travel, the descendants of the original expedition return to Earth in a starship. They find a world that has forgotten the ancient contract. No matter. The colonists have overcome far greater obstacles in their single-minded drive to redeem a promise made before any of them were born...

### **3. Antares Dawn - US\$5.00**

When the super giant star Antares exploded in 2512, the human colony on Alta found their pathway to the stars gone, isolating them from the rest of human space for more than a century. Then one day, a powerful warship materialized in the system without warning. Alarmed by the sudden appearance of such a behemoth, the commanders of the Altan Space Navy dispatched one of their most powerful ships to investigate. What ASNS Discovery finds when they finally catch the intruder is a battered hulk manned by a dead crew.

That is disturbing news for the Altans. For the dead battleship could easily have defeated the whole of the Altan navy. If it could find Alta, then so could whomever it was that beat it. Something must be done...

### **4. Antares Passage - US\$5.00**

After more than a century of isolation, the paths between stars are again open and the people of Alta in contact with their sister colony on Sandar. The opening of the foldlines has not been the unmixed blessing the Altans had supposed, however.

For the reestablishment of interstellar travel has brought with it news of the Ryall, an alien race whose goal is the extermination of humanity. If they are to avoid defeat at the hands of the aliens, Alta must seek out the military might of Earth. However, to reach Earth requires them to dive into the heart of a supernova.

### **5. Antares Victory – First Time in Print – US\$7.00**

After a century of warfare, humanity finally discovered the Achilles heel of the Ryall, their xenophobic reptilian foe. Spica – Alpha Virginis – is the key star system in enemy space. It is the hub through which all Ryall starships must pass, and if humanity can only capture and hold it, they will strangle the Ryall war machine and end their threat to humankind forever.

It all seemed so simple in the computer simulations: Advance by stealth, attack without warning, strike swiftly with overwhelming power. Unfortunately, conquering the Ryall proves the easy part. With the key to victory in hand, Richard and Bethany Drake discover that they must also conquer human nature if they are to bring down the alien foe ...

### **6. Thunderstrike! - US\$6.00**

The new comet found near Jupiter was an incredible treasure trove of water ice and rock. Immediately, the water-starved Luna Republic and the Sierra Corporation, a leader in asteroid mining, were squabbling over rights to the new resource. However, all thoughts of profit and fame were abandoned when a scientific expedition discovered that the comet's trajectory placed it on a collision course with Earth!

As scientists struggled to find a way to alter the comet's course, world leaders tried desperately to restrain mass panic, and two lovers quarreled over the direction the comet was to take, all Earth waited to see if humanity had any future at all...

## 7. The Clouds of Saturn - US\$5.00

When the sun flared out of control and boiled Earth's oceans, humanity took refuge in a place that few would have predicted. In the greatest migration in history, the entire human race took up residence among the towering clouds and deep clear-air canyons of Saturn's upper atmosphere. Having survived the traitor star, they returned to the all-too-human tradition of internecine strife. The new city-states of Saturn began to resemble those of ancient Greece, with one group of cities taking on the role of militaristic Sparta...

## 8. The Sails of Tau Ceti – US\$5.00

*Starhopper* was humanity's first interstellar probe. It was designed to search for intelligent life beyond the solar system. Before it could be launched, however, intelligent life found Earth. The discovery of an alien light sail inbound at the edge of the solar system generated considerable excitement in scientific circles. With the interstellar probe nearing completion, it gave scientists the opportunity to launch an expedition to meet the aliens while they were still in space. The second surprise came when *Starhopper's* crew boarded the alien craft. They found beings that, despite their alien physiques, were surprisingly compatible with humans. That two species so similar could have evolved a mere twelve light years from one another seemed too coincidental to be true.

One human being soon discovered that coincidence had nothing to do with it...

## 9. Gibraltar Earth – First Time in Print — \$6.00

It is the 24th Century and humanity is just gaining a toehold out among the stars. Stellar Survey Starship *Magellan* is exploring the New Eden system when they encounter two alien spacecraft. When the encounter is over, the score is one human scout ship and one alien aggressor destroyed. In exploring the wreck of the second alien ship, spacers discover a survivor with a fantastic story.

The alien comes from a million-star Galactic Empire ruled over by a mysterious race known as the Broa. These overlords are the masters of this region of the galaxy and they allow no competitors. This news presents Earth's rulers with a problem. As yet, the Broa are ignorant of humanity's existence. Does the human race retreat to its one small world, quaking in fear that the Broa will eventually discover Earth? Or do they take a more aggressive approach?

Whatever they do, they must do it quickly! Time is running out for the human race...

## 10. Gibraltar Sun – First Time in Print — \$7.00

The expedition to the Crab Nebula has returned to Earth and the news is not good. Out among the stars, a million systems have fallen under Broan domination, the fate awaiting Earth should the Broa ever learn of its existence. The problem would seem to allow but three responses: submit meekly to slavery, fight and risk extermination, or hide and pray the Broa remain ignorant of humankind for at least a few more generations. Are the hairless apes of Sol III finally faced with a problem for which there is no acceptable solution?

While politicians argue, Mark Rykand and Lisa Arden risk everything to spy on the all-powerful enemy that is beginning to wonder at the appearance of mysterious bipeds in their midst...

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