The Villain with a Thousand Faces (Part Two): The One-Line Backstory

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Yes, back again, so shut up and pay attention and I don't care if you are on fire. Last time I deigned to share some wisdom on the nature of villains (antagonists, if you absolutely must), we cast an eye on the most common of villains, the cardboard cut-out shrub with no soul. These are basically the no-backstory villains who simply exist in order to rub your heroine up the wrong way and get hit round the head with an axe. Today our villains get slightly more sophisticated.

The One-Line Backstory

Yes, they get some backstory, a whole line of it. Think of the difference! From nothing to a COMPLETE SENTENCE. It's possible that the one-line backstory villain is more common than the total cardboard cut-out; in fact a lot of cardboard cut-out villains technically have a one-line backstory kicking about somewhere, but frankly, if your one-line backstory doesn't actually have at least some bearing on or relevance to either the plot of your story or the motivations of your heroine, well then then WHY DID YOU WRITE IT? If your story is supposed to be about your heroine's struggle to make a success of the small rural tavern inherited from a distant uncle with a dubious past, then relevant one-line backstories for the villain of the piece might be: “competing owner of the next tavern along the road who wants to make our heroine fail so that his own business succeeds,” or “former associate of said distant uncle with a dubious past who was involved in the same dubious goings on and thinks the tavern should be his,” or “bloke form same dubious past who has hidden secrets in the tavern that he wants to stay secret.”
Even “heroine's evil twin who just doesn't like her,” while pretty lame, at least has a connection to the protagonist, if not to the actual story. “He's just mean, ok,” isn't a backstory. “He's a demon from the 11th dimension” IS a backstory, but unless being a demon from the 11th dimension has some sort of relevance to either the history of the heroine or, better, the history of the uncle with the dubious past or of the tavern itself, being a demon from the 11th dimension is actually irrelevant to both the heroine and the story and seems rather pointless and WHY DID YOU WRITE IT?

I suggest that one-line backstory that has no actual connection to the heroine or the main thrust of your story is not only a waste of time, it's actually worse than doing nothing at all – you leave the reader trying to figure out what the backstory has to do with anything, and then they start questioning everything and picking at your worldbuilding and all sorts and it's all downhill from there. A backstory that works, however – one that's actually useful – fits seamlessly into the story and explains WHY the villain is the villain, why he stands in opposition to the heroine.

I have a mild OCD that means I like lists, so for no other reason than that, I'm arbitrarily going to create three categories of one-line backstory villains. Take it as read that these overlap somewhat, and there may be other one-line backstories that don't fit into these categories, although if you find any you should keep very quiet because I don't like to be wrong and I have a dragon.

The background-generic backstory
These are villains whose backstories are related to the global or at least general set-up of the world in which the story happens. We moved on a bit into the one-line backstory villains in the last part, with villains who are avatars of (or agents for) something else (the Big Bad, the Opposing Ideology). These are examples of background-generic backstories. They are not, usually tied to a specific individual, and there will likely be many villains at large in the world for whom the same one-line backstory is true. Hydra has many lieutenants; the Big Bad has lots of avatars; the world has plenty of avaricious slum-landlords/greedy bankers/serial killers/racist orc-haters/property developers/whatever to choose from, and the one in the story just happens to be the one with whom the the heroine crosses swords. In a story with many bad-guys, the generic one-liner can usefully serve to cover all the cannon fodder whose purpose is to show up, be humiliated by the heroine, and then conveniently expire.

**The background-specific backstory**

A rather more personal villain is one whose backstory is tied to something quite specific in the story’s setting. There are many slum landlords, but only one slum landlord for the tenement block in which the heroine lives, for example. There are many demons from the 11th dimension,
but only one whose secret true name which will damn them forever back to hell is hidden in a secret room in the cellars of the tavern the heroine has inherited from a distant uncle with a dubious past. A significant difference between the generic and the specific is that in the case of the generic villain, a new one can reasonably arise in place of the old with basically the same agenda and motivation and goals, whereas for the specific villain, doing so would feel somewhere between contrived and utterly ridiculous. A villain with this backstory will usually be properly unique.

The heroine-specific backstory

Even more personal. Again the villain is unique and has a backstory that sets him up as opposition to the heroine, but now it's not to do with the world or setting or other outside circumstances, it's directly related to the heroine herself. Something she's done, something she's going to do, something she's trying to achieve, whatever it is, the villain's opposition is personal right from the start. Arguably I should split this into generic and specific too – arguably the heroine could have done something in her past that has resulted in a whole slew of people having a personal grudge or vendetta against her (ratting out the mob, thwarting the schemes of Satan, exposing Tory party lies, or otherwise crossing some large body of organised villainy). However, that sort of generic-but-personal doesn't fit terribly well with the rest of the argument I'm about to follow, so let's just acknowledge that it theoretically exists, smile and wave, and then shove it back in its box; because even in the examples I've given, it usually comes back to one specific villain leading the charge (in fact, my favourite example from last time, The Terminator, could easily go either way, but a part of the strength of that story is how unrelentingly personal the attack is.

I've ordered these categories by increasing intimacy to the heroine. Different levels of intimacy fit with different styles of story-telling. If your story features a single heroine and is heavy on her character aspects, a villain who is intimately bound to her will fit better than a very generic villain. If your story is an ensemble piece with multiple heroines and a broad sweeping scope then a generic villain might fit better while a very specific villain might actually skew the narrative force towards a heroine who wasn't supposed to steal the stage. Depends on how intimately your story focusses on your heroine(s), but matching the intimacy of the villain (whatever that actually means, but I think you get the vague idea) to the intimacy of the story will generally result in a smoother ride.
Generally. There are always exceptions. But one should only ever approach exceptions having first understood the rules to which they apply.

And here's a proposition for you: is it possible that *every* memorable villain ever created can be reduced to a one-line backstory without losing their significance to their story? In fact, I challenge you find one that can't [1]. No matter how simple or complex, subtle or blunt, that one line is a very powerful place to start, and you shouldn't ever lose sight of it.

That's almost it for today's ponderous lecture. Worlds to conquer, castle to burn, protagonists to execute in inventive ways, that sort of thing. But before we part there's a rather special cardboard cut-out villain that I forgot deliberately neglected last time and needs a little more attention: the scenery chewer.

The Scenery Chewer. What do I mean by that? Loki in The Avengers. Jeremy Irons in Dungeons and Dragons (and yes, that movie *did* exist, no matter how much you all might wish to pretend it didn't. I acknowledge it for it's dragons, which at least had a properly bad attitude, and for Jeremy Irons, who... never mind. Shut up). Alan Rickman in Prince of Thieves. Alan Rickman in Die Hard. Alan Rickman as Professor Snape. Alan Rickman in, well, you get the picture. Notice that every single example here is a movie, not a novel. That's because I can't think of a single novel with a good scenery-chewing villain in it where the villain isn't actually a dominant character in the story. . . and, kids there's a big clue for you, right there. Remember lesson one of being a "cardboard cut-out" villain (as opposed to the sort that's actually a real person)? You exist as a foil for the protagonist. As far as the heroine is concerned, your purpose is to oppose her [2]. You are black to her white. A good villain exists within a story just enough to define the heroine's strength, virtue, ability to play pokemon, whatever it is that's being tested, and no more. Their job done, the cardboard cut-out villain dies or otherwise conveniently buggers off until the next instalment. The clever cardboard cut-out villain may integrate himself into the fabric of the world somehow to improve his chances (as the Avatar of the Big Bad or the Nasty Ideology or some such), but his job is most certainly NOT to steal
scenes, and that is what the scenery chewer does (and if he doesn't then he's not chewing well enough). So ask yourself, before your villain chews the scenery, what the point of it is? Is it a substitute for being interesting in some way that actually benefits the story? Because that's bad, that is. Simply to be funny/cool/exciting? I suppose I won't chide you for that, but do beware of the villain who moves from stealing the occasional scene to stealing the whole story, and for the love of Robert E Howard, don't let him make your heroine look bland.

And yes, yes, next time I write I'll talk about subtle, three-dimensional villains. They're difficult and needs lots of precious thinking time. Worlds to burn, castles to execute in inventive ways, etc., ok?

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[1] I put several seconds of thought into this and I couldn't think of any, which is good enough for me. Find one for me. I'll secretly be impressed while my dragon eats you.

[2] Not all stories are about the heroine. More on that next time. And there are ensemble pieces. But your basic story is hero/heroine vs. villain, and you are advised to understand how that works even if you choose to move away from it.