

Evolution and Deepening of Antagonistic Characters in Films: A Typological Analysis and Exploration of Empathy Construction

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Abstract

This paper explores antagonistic characters in films, specifically focusing on the concept of “empathetic antagonists.” Through a review of relevant literature, the paper defines empathetic antagonists, examines their evolutionary processes, categorizes them, and elucidates their significance in film narratives and how they evoke empathy in the audience. Firstly, the paper reviews prior studies related to empathetic antagonists and provides a conceptual framework. Secondly, it traces the evolution of antagonist characters from simple, one-dimensional evil personas to complex, multifaceted characters with depth. Thirdly, the paper classifies empathetic antagonists into four main types: Complex Motivation, Moral Struggle, Complicated Relationships, and Diverse Backgrounds. Additionally, it offers suggestions for scriptwriting and actor interpretation in shaping these characters. Finally, by synthesizing these aspects, the paper concludes that antagonistic characters in films have transitioned from initially simplistic and flat representations to complex and three-dimensional depictions, evolving from uni-dimensional evil to profound humanity. This trend not only enhances the artistic quality of films but also prompts audiences to contemplate issues of humanity, morality, and emotions. In the future, filmmakers can continue exploring the multifaceted qualities of antagonist characters to enrich character experiences and create more captivating works. Simultaneously, actors need to accurately convey the emotions and complexities of these characters during performances, leaving a lasting impression on the audience. This research is instrumental in understanding the role and impact of antagonist characters in film narratives and offers guidance for creating in-depth and empathetic antagonist characters.

Keywords: antagonistic characters, empathy, characterization

1. Introduction

In the realm of cinematic art, character portrayal has consistently stood as the core focus of creative endeavors and scholarly investigations. The shaping of characters, the revelation of their personalities, and the unfolding of their

character arcs are crucial elements for narrative-driven commercial films. The establishment and characterization of antagonist roles serve as essential components for constructing story structures and contrasting positive images. The presence of antagonistic

characters in films has always played a pivotal role. Often in stark contrast to the protagonist, they add conflict and tension to the story. In the early days of film history, antagonistic characters were frequently depicted as one-dimensional embodiments of evil, characterized by simple motivations and predictable behavior patterns. This portrayal dominated the early stages of cinematic history. However, with the development of film artistry and evolving audience aesthetics, antagonistic characters have undergone significant transformation. Contemporary film antagonists are no longer mere “bad guys” but are instead characterized by complexity, depth, and diversity in motives. This evolution provides audiences with more information and emotional stimulation, enabling them not only to comprehend the antagonist’s actions but also to resonate with them to some extent.

It is evident that the significance of antagonist characters in films cannot be underestimated. As film creation has evolved and improved, the portrayal of antagonist figures has become increasingly complex and diverse. Their roles and functions have also become richer and more varied, making them subjects worthy of study.

Reviewing the developmental trajectory of antagonist characters in films from multiple perspectives and studying their concepts, types, shaping techniques, as well as their current status and future trends, will contribute to expanding the possibilities of character portrayal in film, enhancing the artistic appeal of films, advancing film theory, and providing reference points for future film creation and interpretation.

This paper will explore the current state of research on empathetic antagonists in films, their concepts, evolution, types, and shaping techniques, ultimately presenting research conclusions.

2. Literature Review

Currently, there is relatively limited research specifically focusing on empathetic antagonist characters, but numerous studies on antagonist characters provide essential references for understanding empathetic antagonists. Scholars have conducted in-depth analyses of antagonist characters from various perspectives, employing diverse research paradigms:

(1) Artistic Aesthetics Perspective: Scholars such as Wang Dayong, in *The Artistic Value of*

Antagonistic Characters in Dramatic Performance, emphasize the tragic and contradictory nature of antagonist characters. They deconstruct these characters, aiming to evoke empathy and reflection in the audience, thereby elevating the artistic value of antagonist characters. Liu Jiaqi and Xu Peng, in *Artistic Reflection and Value Expression of Antagonistic Character Construction in the Perspective of Communication*, explore unconventional approaches to shaping antagonist characters, providing new insights for artistic creation from a communication perspective.

(2) Narrative Perspective: Liu Ziyang, in *Joker: An Instructive and Realistic Image of Villain*, highlights the importance of complex and perceptive antagonists, emphasizing their realistic and impactful qualities compared to superficially evil characters with superpowers. Ma Qianhui, in *An Analysis of the Image of Antagonists in Superhero Movies*, asserts that the realism of antagonist characters derives from life, portraying them as narrative drivers and spices that showcase their unique storytelling charm.

(3) Philosophical Perspective: Scholars like Li Letian, in *Venom: Dualistic Superhero Image and Ink Style*, delve into the dualistic nature of antagonist characters, challenging audience values and influencing human nature. Schäfer, Samantha, in *Reading Over to the Dark Side: The Complexity of the Male Villain in Film and Literature*, suggests that viewers perceive evil as an alternative viewpoint and a tangible manifestation of everyone’s dark side, making antagonist characters inherently fascinating.

(4) Evolutionary Perspective: Michel Martin Del Campo, in *Sympathy for the Devils: An Analysis of the Villain Archetype Since the Nineteenth Century*, studies the evolution of villainous images in film since the late nineteenth century, showcasing significant changes. Modern villains may not necessarily face punishment, and they are portrayed as relevant or even sympathetic.

(5) Market Perspective: Yang Chuchu, in *Discussion on the Transformation of Animation Antagonistic Characters under Postmodernism*, argues that the increasing audience base and cultural exchange necessitate multidimensional antagonist character design to meet diverse demands.

(6) Psychological Perspective: Research such as Enrique Cámara Arenas’s *Villains in our mind: A psychological approach to literary and filmic villainy*

and Massimo Salgaro and Benjamin Van Tourhout's study on *Why does Frank Underwood look at us?* analyze the psychological aspects that lead to audience empathy towards antagonist characters.

Apart from these, studies on antagonist characters also explore subgenres, business application models, actor performances, music symbolism, among other angles. As the film industry continues to thrive, research on this subject is becoming increasingly comprehensive. However, there is a relative scarcity of studies specifically isolating empathetic antagonist characters as individual research subjects, with most research treating antagonist characters as a broad category without detailed subdivision studies.

3. Definition of Empathetic Antagonists

The concept of empathetic antagonists is not extensively covered in existing literature; however, insights from psychology and narratology contribute to its conceptualization.

Psychologists posit that humans possess the capacity for sympathy and empathy, implying the ability to perceive others' emotions and understand their pain or joy. Building upon sympathy, individuals are more likely to experience emotional resonance when they perceive shared emotional experiences or states with others. Empathy is often described as a cognitive response that combines emotional resonance with self-experience, memories, and other factors.

Antagonist characters, or villains, are counterparts in narratives that oppose positive characters, as proposed by Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folk Tale*. This opposition typically involves conflicting motivations, behaviors, and values, serving to obstruct the actions of positive characters, prolong the narrative, and heighten the challenges faced by these protagonists. In films, antagonist characters often represent forces of conflict, hostility, and opposition to the main characters or story objectives. The confrontation and conflict between them and the main characters usually form the core conflict of the story. Their presence and actions are often crucial driving forces in the plot.

Empathetic antagonist characters are created on the basis of this emotional foundation. In accordance with relevant theories, this paper defines empathetic antagonist characters as

follows: characters in audiovisual works that elicit sympathy or understanding from the audience, allowing viewers to sense their emotional experiences, comprehend their motivations and actions, and to some extent, resonate emotionally with them. These characters represent conflict, hostility, and opposition to positive characters or story objectives. Empathetic antagonist characters typically exhibit diverse personalities, varied backgrounds, complex motivations, and emotional depth.

4. Evolution of Antagonist Characters

The evolution of antagonist characters can be categorized into three stages:

Early Stage: In the early days of film history, antagonist characters were often portrayed as one-dimensional embodiments of evil. Their images were flat, and their roles were relatively simple, with straightforward motivations and personalities. This traditional presentation dominated many classic films. For instance, in *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), the robbers represent the archetypal traditional antagonists, driven solely by the pursuit of wealth, using any means necessary to achieve their goals. This behavior highlighted their inherently malicious nature. These early films were constrained by the limitations of film duration, emphasizing plot and action over the depth and complexity of characters. The silent German horror film *Nosferatu* (1922) continued this trend with Count Orlok, a one-dimensional evil vampire character, emphasizing terror and supernatural elements to evoke fear and suspense.

These early antagonist characters primarily served to drive the plot forward and create tension, lacking the depth and complexity of character features. As film art evolved, antagonist characters gradually became more nuanced and intricate.

Transitional Stage: In the 1960s, as cinematic philosophies shifted, antagonist characters began to exhibit increased complexity and depth. In the film *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), the character Sherif Ali, played by Omar Sharif, marked an early example of a complex antagonist. Sherif Ali, a leader of an Arab tribe, collaborated with the main character T.E. Lawrence but also conflicted with him at times. Sherif Ali's motivations and actions were influenced not just by simple malice but by his culture, honor, and loyalty to his nation.

Audiences could witness his internal struggles and concerns for the Arab people. Similarly, in the film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), the antagonist George Woolf, played by Richard Burton, portrayed a character with complexity. He engaged in an extramarital affair with the main character Martha, leading to emotional and moral conflicts with her husband, George. George Woolf's character exhibited not only villainous traits but also love and deep emotions, revealing moral and emotional complexities that resonated with the audience.

During this stage, antagonist characters in films gained a level of depth, transcending the simple, flat representation of evil. This complexity prompted audiences to contemplate the motivations and actions of these characters, enhancing the quality and appeal of films.

Mature Stage: Antagonist characters reached a stage of richer and more profound internal characteristics, becoming indispensable in cinematic narratives that evoke audience empathy and resonance. By crafting antagonists with empathetic qualities, filmmakers elevated the artistic and entertainment value of their works. This trend had implications not only for artistic creation but also for commercial success. For example, in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), the antagonist Thanos surprised audiences with his

complex and thoughtful motivations. As a powerful and intelligent villain, his motivations, distinct from the attention-seeking Loki, revealed a profound understanding of the limited resources of the universe and the perpetual expansion of life. In his quest to save the universe, Thanos commanded the forging of the Infinity Gauntlet, gathering six Infinity Stones, and ultimately wiping out half of all life to maintain balance. Thanos' motivations seemed selfless and fearless, making him a complex antagonist. Despite his extreme and brutal methods, audiences could understand his perspective. In a crucial moment, when faced with the choice of sacrificing a loved one to obtain the Soul Stone, Thanos, driven by reason over emotion, sacrificed his beloved daughter Gamora. This demonstrated the deep emotions of the supposedly most powerful super-villain in history, garnering widespread attention and sparking contemplation among the audience on moral and ethical issues.

Using the North American film market as an example, analyzing the top ten grossing films from 2000 to 2023 reveals a clear trend: most major antagonist characters exhibit complex personalities, profound background stories, and diverse motivations.

Table 1. 2000-2023 North American Box Office Top 10 Films

Rank	Film	Box Office (Billion USD)	Release Year	Antagonist Character	Complex Characterization
1	<i>Avengers: Endgame</i>	85.8	2019	Thanos	Yes
2	<i>Avatar</i>	76.0	2009	Colonel Miles Quaritch	No
3	<i>Avengers: Infinity War</i>	75.0	2018	Thanos	Yes
4	<i>Star Wars: The Force Awakens</i>	93.2	2015	Kylo Ren	Yes
5	<i>The Avengers</i>	62.8	2012	Loki	Yes
6	<i>Jurassic World</i>	65.2	2015	Indominus Rex	No
7	<i>Spider-Man: Far From Home</i>	88.0	2019	Mysterio	Yes
8	<i>Furious 7</i>	53.1	2015	Deckard Shaw	Yes
9	<i>Black Panther</i>	70.0	2018	Erik Killmonger	Yes
10	<i>The Dark Knight</i>	53.4	2008	The Joker	Yes

5. Types of Empathetic Antagonists

Considering the characteristics of empathetic antagonists, this paper categorizes them into the

following four main types:

(1) **Complex Motivations Type:** Antagonists of this type possess intricate motivations. Their

actions are driven not only by evil or selfish purposes but are influenced by various factors. Their motivations may include being harmed, seeking revenge, protecting their families, or attempting to achieve certain ideals or goals.

(2) Moral Struggle Type: Antagonists of this type frequently face moral struggles, oscillating between good and evil as they try to find their own path. The motivations of these antagonists encompass both good and evil. They often find themselves compelled to commit evil deeds, or they believe that their actions are just. Balancing different values in their decisions leads to profound contemplation for the audience.

(3) Complex Relationship Type: Antagonists of this type have intricate relationships with other characters, whether emotional connections with main characters or intricate power struggles with other antagonists. These complex relationships add dramatic and emotional dimensions, making the story more engaging.

(4) Diverse Background Type: Antagonists of this type have diverse backgrounds and histories, including personal experiences, family backgrounds, and social environments. These diverse backgrounds make it easier for the audience to understand their actions and motivations, fostering emotional resonance.

Table 2. Examples of empathetic antagonist characters for each type

Complex Motivations Type	Moral Struggle Type	Complex Relationship Type	Diverse Background Type
Michael Corleone (<i>The Godfather</i> series)	Bane (<i>The Dark Knight Rises</i>)	Stephen (<i>Django Unchained</i>)	John Wick (<i>John Wick</i> series)
the Joker (<i>The Dark Knight</i>)	Obi-Wan Kenobi (<i>Star Wars prequel trilogy</i>)	Caesar (<i>Gladiator</i>)	Frank Costello (<i>The Departed</i>)
Dr. Hannibal Lecter (<i>The Silence of the Lambs</i>)	Harvey Dent (DC Series)	John Smith (<i>Unforgiven</i>)	Hermione Granger <i>Harry Potter</i> Series

A villainous character may belong to a specific category or exhibit characteristics from multiple categories. For instance, the Joker in *The Dark Knight* is a well-rounded antagonist, embodying traits of the Complex Motivations Type, Moral Struggle Type, Complex Relationship Type, and Diverse Background Type. He is a character with a rich inner world and emotional depth. This nuanced portrayal provides audiences with a profound character experience and enhances the emotional depth of the entire story. By incorporating multiple traits in character development, creators can flexibly showcase the psychological aspects of characters, thereby elevating the literary quality and emotional allure of the entire narrative. This clever and diverse character design aids in deepening emotional resonance within the work, guiding the audience to contemplate complex aspects of human nature and moral issues.

6. Crafting Techniques for Empathetic Villains

To create an empathetic villainous character, it is essential to consider both scriptwriting and actor

portrayal:

(1) Scriptwriting Aspects

Character Traits: The villain's personality should be vivid, deep, and well-defined, filled with distinct characteristics. Unique preferences, fears, past experiences, and future plans can make the character lifelike, enhancing their attractiveness and contributing to the story's diversity and complexity.

Motivations and Goals: The villain's motivations and goals should be persuasive and rational, enabling the audience to understand and emotionally resonate with them. This approach avoids simplifying the villain as purely evil, revealing their internal beliefs, values, and desires, creating profound conflicts with the protagonist.

Actions and Behavior: The villain's actions and behavior should be logical, motivated, and impactful, reflecting their plans and strategies. This portrayal positions the villain not only as a hostile force but also showcases their creativity

and complexity, adding tension and suspense to the story.

Inner Conflicts and Struggles: Delving into the villain's inner conflicts provides rich emotional material for actors and a deeper understanding for the audience. Expressing the internal contradictions and struggles of the villain humanizes the character, fostering emotional resonance with the audience.

(2) Actor Portrayal

Emotional Expression: Actors need to convey the complexity of the villain through emotional expression, communicating their emotional motives, internal struggles, and emotional transformations. This not only deepens the audience's understanding of the character but also enhances the character's depth.

Character Interpretation: The actor's interpretation of the character is crucial. They must accurately grasp the villain's motives and psychological state to convey these aspects in their performance. This helps create a more authentic and well-rounded character, making it easier for the audience to connect and empathize.

In conclusion, scriptwriting and actor portrayal are crucial collaborative factors in shaping empathetic villains. A captivating villain requires a script that provides depth, and actors need to bring the character to life through profound interpretation and emotional expression. This synergy creates engaging and vibrant character images, making the story more profound and interesting.

7. Conclusion

After reviewing relevant literature on empathetic villain characters, this paper provided a definition for empathetic villains and explored the evolution of villain characters in films, their types, and crafting techniques. It summarized the development history and creative trends of villain characters in movies.

Building upon previous research, this paper defines empathetic villains as characters in film and television productions capable of eliciting sympathy or understanding from the audience. They enable viewers to feel the characters' emotional experiences, comprehend their motivations and actions, and, to some extent, resonate emotionally with them. These characters typically represent conflict, hostility, and opposition to the main characters or story

goals, exhibiting diverse traits such as complex personalities, varied backgrounds, intricate motivations, and emotions.

The evolution of villain characters in films can be categorized into three stages: early stage, turning point stage, and mature stage. It transitioned from simple, evil images in the early period to modern, complex, and three-dimensional character portrayals. By deepening the internal features and emotional layers of villain characters, films help the audience better understand their motivations and emotional struggles, fostering emotional resonance.

This paper identified four main types of empathetic villain characters: complex motivation type, moral struggle type, complex relationship type, and diverse background type. These characters no longer simply represent evil but embody complexity, depth, and humanity. An empathetic villain may belong to a specific category or exhibit traits from multiple categories, resulting in a character with intricate complexity.

To craft an empathetic villain, this paper highlighted key factors in scriptwriting and actor portrayal. In scriptwriting, careful design of the villain's personality, motivations, goals, actions, and inner struggles is crucial to showcase their complexity and depth. Actors, through emotional expression and accurate character interpretation, bring this design to life, evoking emotional resonance from the audience.

The trend in the development of villain characters in films is evident, moving from simplicity to complexity, from one-dimensional evil to profound humanity. This trend not only enhances the artistic value of films but also encourages audiences to delve deeper into considerations of humanity, morality, and emotional issues. In the future, filmmakers can continue to explore the multifaceted qualities of villain characters to enrich the audience's experience and create more captivating works.

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