The Villain-Effect: Distance and Ubiquity in Neo-Victorian Popular Culture

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Abstract

This chapter argues that in neo-Victorianism – and in twenty-first century culture more widely – a narratological model of the villain as an archetype fulfilling a particular story-function, no longer suffices. Instead, villains often cross over from their allotted narratives and acquire a different narrative function in someone else’s story, refusing to ‘stay put’ or ‘know their place’ in time and space. The chapter proposes a model of villainy that is performative, and conveyed through distance, that is, an asymmetry of narrative detail when compared to the hero or anti-hero. Contemporary novelists, filmmakers, comic book authors and illustrators, and television writers repeatedly evoke and reinvent the nineteenth-century villain. This reveals important connections between the Victorian age’s serial fiction, adaptations and melodramas, and developments in the production and consumption of media today.

Keywords


1 Victorian and Pre-Victorian Antecedents

Nineteenth-century ideas of villains and villainy have cast a long shadow over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In part, this is because, as neo-Victorianism attests, we are still dealing with the complex cultural, political, economic and moral legacies of the Victorians (Hadley 2010: 6–15; Mitchell 2010: 1–2; Poore 2012: 4–5). In part also, as this chapter will explore, their continued significance is a reflection of technology: both the Victorians’ own technological breakthroughs, and the ways in which modern digital culture shapes and reshapes our engagement with villains from the Victorian era. In this chapter, I aim to set out some key themes of the Neo-Victorian Villains collection, and to advance my own theory
of the ‘villain-effect’, the sleights-of-hand of emplotment and performance that create the aura of a villain, yet which leave him or her tantalisingly out of reach (and hence, reusable).

I will begin, briefly, with a survey of villains in Victorian popular culture, as a way of ‘reading backwards’ to understand some of the key features of the neo-Victorian villain. It is important to acknowledge, from the start, that there was no single ‘Victorian morality’ against which the villains of the period rebelled (much though the 1980s discourse of ‘Victorian values’ seemed to imply or wish it to be so).

This volume has gravitated towards the afterlives of villainous figures of the 1880s and 1890s in particular: Jekyll and Hyde, Wilde's Dorian Gray and Salomé, du Maurier's Svengali, Jack the Ripper, Conan Doyle's Professor Moriarty, and Stoker's Dracula. However, even their histories as characters often stretch back to the beginning of the nineteenth century and beyond. Stevenson's Gothic double, Jekyll and Hyde, has his roots in both James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and in the real-life story of the eighteenth-century Deacon Brodie, and before that, to Scots Calvinist beliefs (Calder qtd. in Stevenson 2003: 127–128). Many of these villains' circumstances are modelled to some extent on the sixteenth-century Faust myth (Jekyll and Hyde, for instance, or Dorian Gray, or arguably Trilby). Salomé is a Biblical figure reinterpreted for the *fin de siècle*, while Svengali’s powers are clearly developed, in part, from the ‘animal magnetism' theories of Franz Anton Mesmer, 120 years earlier, and before that, myths of demonic possession. Count Dracula, of course, arrives at the end of a century of development of the vampire myth, including John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819) and James Robinson Planché’s play *The Vampire* (1820).

Moreover, it would be an error to presume that Victorian popular entertainment created a black-and-white conflict between hero and villain that the twentieth and twenty-first century then reinterpreted, finding interesting ‘shades of grey' in the anti-hero and the sympathetic villain that the Victorians simply hadn't recognised. From the ‘Newgate Calendar' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to penny-bloods of the 1830s and 1840s dealing with dashing highwaymen and criminals like Dick Turpin, Claude Duval and Jack Sheppard, and with troubled aristocrats like Sir Francis Varney in James Malcolm Rymer’s *Varney the Vampire* (1845–7), popular fiction had frequently explored the

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2 As Alexandra Warwick evocatively puts it, “Jack the Ripper, Dorian Gray, Jekyll and Hyde, Dracula, the Invisible Man and Sherlock Holmes swirl in the popular imagination, condensed into a definitive Gothic code of a foggy, gas-lit cobbled street, threatened by an unseen malevolent presence” (Warwick 2007: 36).