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THE CHILD AND THE BAD GUY

Why Children Sometimes Need to Become the Villain

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

Children sometimes borrow the villain because the villain carries a power their ordinary self has not yet learned to hold.

I remember a girl who was almost impossibly quiet.

She played independently, watched carefully and rarely fought for the centre of anything. She was gentle, self-contained and easy to miss in a busy room.

Then Scar arrived.

Not the soft hero. Not the brave cub. Scar - the shadowy uncle from The Lion King with the low voice, the sharp face and the whole room arranged around his plans.

She returned to him again and again.

She moved like him. Spoke through him. Built stories around him. Her body changed when she became him: her chin lifted, her voice deepened and a child who usually took up almost no space suddenly knew exactly how to command the scene.

It would have been easy to worry about the fascination.

Why was this quiet little girl so interested in the bad guy?

But perhaps that was the wrong question.

Perhaps the better question was: what could Scar do that she could not yet do as herself?

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I cannot tell you exactly what the character meant to her. That would be the whole mistake. But I could see that the role gave her something.

A voice. A posture. A dangerous sort of confidence. Permission to occupy the room.

Children do not only meet characters in stories.

Sometimes they borrow them.

THE CHILD WHO BORROWS A VILLAIN

A character is a ready-made body.

It comes with a walk, a voice, a face, a history and a set of powers. The child does not have to begin from nothing. They can step inside and discover what becomes possible.

Heroes offer certain powers: courage, loyalty, rescue, endurance, goodness recognised by others.

Villains often carry the powers childhood is less openly invited to hold.

Refusal.

Appetite.

Command.

Cunning.

Anger.

Self-interest.

The pleasure of being feared.

The right to enter a scene and alter its weather.

None of this means the child wants to become cruel. It means the character contains an intensity that catches their attention.

The villain is often exaggerated, which is precisely why the role can be useful. The power is made visible. It has a costume, a voice and a proper entrance.

A child who cannot yet say, "No, I do not want that," may be able to roar it as a dragon.

A child who disappears inside the group may be able to command an army as a queen, witch or lion.

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A child who is always praised for kindness may become fascinated by the character who does not care whether anybody approves.

The role is not necessarily a destination.

It may be a borrowed road into power.

The question is not simply why the child likes the bad guy. It is what the bad guy can do that the child cannot yet do as themselves.

THE BAD GUY IS NOT A CONFESSION

Adults can become strangely literal around children's fantasy.

A child plays the doctor and nobody assumes they are secretly planning a medical career before snack time.

A child becomes a dog and we do not immediately ring home to discuss an emerging identity crisis.

But let them become a murderer, monster, witch, tyrant or nasty lion and the room gets twitchy.

We start treating the role as evidence.

Perhaps the child is angry.

Perhaps they have seen something unsuitable.

Perhaps the play is aggressive.

Perhaps there is a problem at home.

Any of these things may occasionally matter. Repeated distress, sudden changes, disclosures and genuinely harmful behaviour must be taken seriously.

But a chosen role is not a confession of character.

Pretending to be cruel is not the same as wanting cruelty in waking life.

Fantasy allows a child to approach experiences without making them literal. They can be dangerous without becoming a danger. They can hold power without being permanently defined by it. They can enjoy the dramatic force of destruction while remaining deeply attached to the people around them.

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This is one of play's great freedoms.

It allows the child to say, "Let us see what happens if I become this," without promising to remain there.

WHAT THE VILLAIN CARRIES

Most good villains are not interesting because they are merely bad.

They are interesting because they carry power in concentrated form.

They enter with certainty. They want something. They are not embarrassed by their appetite. They often possess intelligence, theatre, humour, rage, style and a remarkable lack of concern about being called difficult.

The actions may be destructive. The underlying capacities are not automatically so.

Anger can protect.

Refusal can preserve integrity.

Ambition can become purpose.

Cunning can become strategy.

Command can become leadership.

Self-interest can become a boundary.

The capacity to frighten can become the capacity not to be easily frightened.

Children often receive these powers in moral bundles.

The hero is brave, loyal and good.

The villain is angry, selfish and wrong.

Real development is not that tidy.

A child needs kindness, but also the ability to disappoint somebody.

They need belonging, but also the strength to stand alone.

They need care, but also appetite.

They need harmony, but also a voice capable of breaking it when something is untrue.

The villain may carry a distorted power, but distorted power is still power.

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The task is not to copy the distortion.

It is to discover whether the living force beneath it can be brought home.

THE SHADOW IS NOT THE SAME AS EVIL

Jung used the word shadow for the parts of the personality that remain outside the identity we consciously live.

The shadow is often described as dark, but it is not simply a box of wicked impulses waiting behind the wallpaper.

It can contain qualities that were discouraged, shamed, overlooked or never given enough room to develop.

For a forceful child, softness may fall into shadow.

For a helpful child, refusal may fall into shadow.

For a clever child, uncertainty may fall into shadow.

For a quiet child, command, appetite and visible anger may fall into shadow.

The role of the villain can give these excluded qualities a temporary body.

This does not mean we analyse the child and announce that Scar represents repressed dominance. That would be adult theatre masquerading as insight.

We stay with what can actually be seen.

What changes when the child enters the role?

Do they become louder, more decisive, more physical, funnier, more socially connected or more able to resist?

What can they express through the character that rarely appears in ordinary interaction?

Can they step out of the role again?

Does the play widen over time, or does it become increasingly fixed?

The shadow is not a verdict.

It is a reminder that the child is always larger than the version of them adults find easiest to recognise.

WHY THE QUIET CHILD MAY CHOOSE SCAR

The girl I remember did not need help becoming quieter.

She had quiet covered.

What she seemed to find in Scar was almost the opposite movement.

The character carried presence. He stretched time around himself. He planned. He watched. He controlled the pace. He did not ask permission to matter.

Perhaps she was exploring command.

Perhaps she loved the voice, the face or the delicious drama of being the one who knew more than everybody else.

Perhaps it was simply excellent play.

We do not have to solve it.

The important observation was that a different child appeared within the role.

Not a false child.

Not the real child finally exposed.

Another possible child.

The role opened a door into a way of being that ordinary expectations had not yet made available.

This is why adults should be careful when praising a child's usual temperament too heavily.

"You are such a good quiet girl" can sound loving while quietly building a fence.

The child may begin to feel that voice, anger, refusal or theatrical power belong to somebody else.

Then along comes Scar, dragging the whole forbidden wardrobe behind him.

Of course the child is interested.

A borrowed villain can become a rehearsal room for powers the child has not yet learned to carry in daylight.

BECOMING IS NOT ENDORSING

Children do not need to agree with a character in order to become them.

They can be the wolf and still love the grandmother.

They can burn the castle down in the morning and spend the afternoon caring for a snail with startling tenderness.

Play can hold contradictions more easily than adult explanation.

This matters because moral development is not strengthened by keeping children away from every morally difficult position.

A child also learns through trying the position on.

What happens when everybody is afraid of me?

What happens after I take everything?

What does victory feel like if nobody wants to stand beside me?

Can the bad guy be lonely and still dangerous?

Can somebody love the villain without allowing the villain to rule?

These are not tidy lessons. They are dramatic experiments.

The adult does not need to interrupt every dark turn with a moral speech.

But nor do we hand over the whole setting because the child has found their inner tyrant.

No, Scar does not get to run the lunch table as a dictatorship.

The boundary remains.

Other children need consent, safety and the right not to be repeatedly cast as prey.

Becoming the villain is useful only while the play remains a place the child can enter, shape and leave.

THE ADULT IN THE AUDIENCE

Villain play reveals the adult as well as the child.

Some adults delight in it. Others feel embarrassed, anxious or morally responsible for stopping it.

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A practitioner who was frightened by anger may read every growl as escalation.

A parent who values kindness above all else may fear that fascination with bad characters means empathy is failing.

An adult who survives through control may struggle when a child chooses the character who refuses all control except their own.

Sometimes we hurry the child back towards the hero because the villain disturbs our idea of innocence.

But childhood innocence is not the absence of darkness.

It is the capacity to meet the whole range of human possibility without yet being fixed inside it.

The child can explore death, danger, jealousy, revenge, power and destruction in symbolic form. That does not ruin childhood.

It may be one of the ways childhood metabolises a world that already contains these things.

The adult's work is to remain steady enough not to panic and awake enough not to romanticise.

Not every villain game is profound.

Sometimes the child likes the costume.

Sometimes everybody watched the same film.

Sometimes chasing is simply fun.

We do not need to turn every cardboard sword into the descent of the psyche.

But we should notice when a role repeatedly changes what the child can access.

THE ARCHETYPE APPROACH: WHICH POWER IS BEING TRIED ON?

The Archetype Approach does not assign a villain to one archetype.

Characters are mixtures, and children use them in different ways.

A villain may carry the Rebel's refusal, the Joker's delight in taboo, the Energy archetype's intensity, the Planner's control, the Thinker's strategy, the Mover's pursuit or the Watcher's cold distance.

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The same character can offer one child courage and another child concealment.

So the useful question is not, "Which archetype is Scar?"

It is, "Which power becomes available to this child when Scar enters?"

Four observations can help.

First: what changes in the child's body?

Do they become taller, louder, slower, quicker, more deliberate, more expansive or more hidden?

Second: what changes in relationship?

Do they lead, frighten, invite, exclude, protect, command or finally attract other children into their play?

Third: what changes in language?

Does the child gain a firmer no, a richer story, a darker humour, a plan or a direct expression of wanting?

Fourth: what balancing movement is missing?

Can the powerful child also receive care? Can the controller tolerate surprise? Can the predator stop? Can the strategist enter genuine relationship? Can the child take off the role without collapsing back into silence?

Balance does not mean turning the villain nice.

It means helping the child carry the power without becoming trapped inside its most distorted form.

THE VILLAIN NEEDS A BODY TOO

Like the monster in a dream, the villain often arrives through the body before the child can explain the attraction.

The face changes.

The shoulders rise.

The voice drops or sharpens.

The walk becomes slow, stalking, grand or suddenly still.

This is not decoration around the play.

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It is part of the thinking.

The child discovers power through posture, rhythm, volume and distance.

A cloak can lend width.

A mask can lend anonymity.

A stick can become a staff, wand, sword or sign of office.

A raised platform can become a throne.

These materials allow the child to enter the role and, importantly, to leave it.

The cape comes off.

The mask returns to the basket.

The throne becomes two crates again.

The physical boundary helps preserve a psychological one.

The child can say, "Scar did that," and gradually begin to wonder what part of the action belongs to the character, what part belongs to the game and what part they themselves may need to understand or repair.

WAKING INVITATIONS

When a villain keeps returning, the environment can widen the play without taking it over.

The invitation follows the child's fascination. It does not convert one interesting week into a six-week Bad Guy Topic with laminated objectives.

Steady on.

COSTUME AND EXIT: PUT IT ON, TAKE IT OFF

Offer capes, fabric, masks, crowns, sticks and simple props that can be chosen and removed.

The child may name when the character begins and when the character ends. A mirror can help them see the change. A basket or hook gives the role somewhere to rest.

The invitation is power with an exit.

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ROLE SWAPPING: MOVE AROUND THE STORY

Children can swap villain, hero, witness, helper, creature and narrator roles.

The child who always commands may discover what it is like to be rescued. The child who is always chased may choose to become the one everybody runs from. The villain may briefly become the storyteller and decide what happens to everybody else.

The invitation is flexibility rather than fixed identity.

BUILD THE LAIR: GIVE POWER A PLACE

Villains usually have somewhere to stand.

A cave, tower, ship, den, throne room, hidden laboratory or shadowy corner gives the character a world. Construction slows the drama enough for planning, negotiation and shared meaning to appear.

The lair may need doors, rules, treasure, traps, a second exit or a place where nobody is allowed without permission.

The invitation is intensity given structure.

ASK WHAT THE VILLAIN WANTS

Not, "Why are you being naughty?"

Try, "What does this character want?"

The answer may be a kingdom, food, revenge, quiet, treasure, respect or simply everybody out of the way.

Desire gives the story movement. It also creates consequences.

What happens if the villain gets it? What happens if they do not? Who else wants something?

The invitation is motive without diagnosis.

LET THE CONSEQUENCES ENTER

Villain play becomes richer when the story continues beyond the moment of domination.

The castle has been taken. Now what?

Everybody has run away. Is the villain pleased, bored or alone?

The bridge has been destroyed. How does anybody get home?

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The child does not need an adult-scripted punishment. They need room for the world to answer the action.

The invitation is morality emerging through relationship and consequence.

CONSENT AND STOP SIGNALS: KEEP THE GAME A GAME

Children need to know who has agreed to be chased, captured, ordered around or frightened.

A stop signal must work immediately. Safe bases can be established. Roles can be renegotiated. Nobody should be trapped in the victim position because one child's symbolic journey has become the setting's full-time job.

The invitation is power held inside relationship.

WHEN THE VILLAIN TAKES OVER

Sometimes the play becomes stuck.

The same child must always be the villain.

The same peers are always hunted, humiliated or excluded.

The child cannot tolerate the story changing, cannot leave the role or becomes genuinely distressed when the fantasy is interrupted.

At that point, the answer is not necessarily to ban the character.

The answer is to restore movement.

Can another child narrate?

Can the villain lose one power and gain another?

Can the chase become a building problem?

Can the child make the character in clay, draw a map of the lair or invent what happens when the bad guy has nobody left to command?

Can the adult provide direct experiences of safe leadership, boundary-setting, physical strength, decision-making or being heard outside the fantasy?

A stuck role may be asking for a wider life.

The boundary remains clear: no hurting, no forced participation, no humiliation dressed up as imagination.

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We protect the group without shaming the power the child is trying to meet.

OBSERVATION WITHOUT MORAL PANIC

A useful observation stays close to the play.

"The child chose the Scar figure on four occasions this week. During role play she lowered her voice, stood on a crate and directed two animal figures around the space. She invited another child to be Simba and accepted a role change when they asked. Later she removed the cape and returned to drawing independently."

That tells us something.

It shows repetition, embodiment, leadership, narrative control, social invitation, flexibility and return.

It does not need: "The child is processing repressed aggression through identification with an evil character."

Maybe she was exploring aggression.

Maybe she loved the voice.

Maybe Scar was the first character who made power look interesting enough to try on.

Describe what changed.

Notice what became possible.

Leave the final meaning with the child.

In play, a child can carry danger without becoming dangerous.

A HYPOTHESIS WORTH FOLLOWING

The Night Garden offers a careful hypothesis.

When children repeatedly choose villains or darker characters, they may be exploring powers that feel unavailable, forbidden or underdeveloped within their ordinary identity.

When the play is held within safety, flexibility and genuine choice, the child may begin to integrate those powers in less distorted ways.

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The quiet child may gain voice.

The compliant child may practise refusal.

The frightened child may carry danger.

The controlling child may discover consequence, relationship and the possibility of stepping down from the throne.

This is not proven simply because the idea feels right.

It needs careful observation.

Does the child become more able to use the same power outside the role?

Can they say no more directly? Lead without frightening? Express anger without becoming consumed by it? Move between powerful and vulnerable positions?

Does the villain play become richer and more flexible rather than repetitive and coercive?

Can adults support the fascination without glamorising harm, imposing symbolic meanings or dragging the child towards the hero because darkness makes us uncomfortable?

These are serious questions hiding inside what can look like ordinary dress-up.

The girl who became Scar did not stop being quiet.

But quiet was no longer the only shape available to her.

Somewhere inside the story, she had found another posture.

Another voice.

Another possible self.

The bad guy may not be trying to pull the child away from who they are.

Sometimes the bad guy is escorting them towards a part of themselves that has been waiting in the wings.

We do not need to rescue children from every dark character. Sometimes the character is helping them recover a missing piece of their own power.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oliver Riddett is the founder of the Archetype Approach, a developmental and relational model of childhood built around twelve universal archetypes. Developed through practice at Children of Towan in Porthtowan, Cornwall, the approach helps parents and practitioners look beneath behaviour and respond through balance rather than correction.