

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF VILLAINS:

The Shadow, Cultural Fear, and Why We Love the Wicked

★ FAMILY DISCUSSION GUIDE ★

Use this guide with any story you are watching together that has a memorable villain. The goal is not to analyze the bad guy to death. It is to notice what our fascination with them is actually made of.



1 BEFORE WATCHING

Set the stage and open hearts and minds.

- Everyone name a villain they find hard to look away from. You do not have to explain why yet.
- Guess out loud: will the bad guy in this story be scary, be charming, or be someone you end up feeling a little sorry for?



2 WHILE WATCHING

Notice what makes the villain compelling.

- When the villain grabs your attention more than the hero, say so, and try to name what did it: their freedom, their confidence, their cleverness, or their style.
- Watch for the villain being honest about wanting something the good characters pretend not to want.
- If the story gives the villain a sad past, notice the moment it happens and how it changes your feelings.



3 AFTER WATCHING

Reflect together and make meaning.

- Did the sad backstory explain what the villain did? Did it make what they did okay? Can both be true?
- Was the villain more interesting than the hero? If so, why do you think that is?
- What was this villain afraid of, or what fear did they seem to stand for?



4 FAMILY REFLECTION

Go deeper with empathy, honesty, and connection.

- Everyone name the thing you secretly liked about the villain. Usually it is the freedom or the confidence, not the cruelty, and that is worth knowing about yourself.
- A good story lets a villain be fully explained and still fully responsible. Name a time in real life when understanding why someone acted did not mean it was okay.
- Try this: the parts of ourselves we keep out of sight do not disappear. Which feelings are easier to meet in a story than to admit in the mirror?



DR. Z TAKEAWAY

We are drawn to villains because they show us, in a form we can safely examine, what we would rather believe we do not contain.

So the most useful question after a story is not only whether the villain was scary. It is what about them we could not look away from, and what that says about us.



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Connection heals. Conversations help.

