

We can't cast everyone as villain or hero

When cooperation on Capitol Hill is lacking, it's up to us mortals to set the example

By SCOTT WALTERS

THE AMERICAN MIDDLE

Part of our opinion series The American Middle, this essay encourages voters to see political opponents as compatriots, not as villains.

Gotham City has two new villains this fall. On HBO Max, Colin Farrell stars as *The Penguin*, a midlevel mobster who seizes an opportunity to take over the city's drug trade. Meanwhile, Joaquin Phoenix reprises his role as *The Joker* in a sequel to the 2019 film that transformed a failed clown into a sadistic killer. Will the city ever be the same?

Our villains may spread their own brands of mayhem, but they have similar features. Villains see others as means to an end, even flaunting their moral decay. Their identities are obscure. They may speak in strange accents (like Scar in *The Lion King*), have grimy features (like Gollum in *The Lord Of the Rings*), or obscure their faces (like Voldemort in the Harry Potter stories). Some of the worst villains

embody all these traits at once (Hannibal Lecter, for instance). Eventually, their malevolence becomes so great that a group of heroes must unite against them in a final epic battle.

Perhaps not coincidentally, this month is also the run-up to the presidential election, when both candidates are being cast as threats to society. The level of rhetoric has reached comic book proportions, with each side portraying the other's candidate as a villain.

Politics have always been polarized, but increasingly people see other voters, not just the candidates, as enemies. An increasing number of people now say those in the opposite political party are more closed-minded, dishonest and even immoral than

people in their own party. Democrats say Republicans are "closed-minded," while Republicans say Democrats are "lazy." In fact, according to Pew Research Center, a whopping 72% of Republicans see Democrats as "somewhat or a lot" more immoral than other Americans, while 63% of Democrats say the same about Republicans.

In the 1960s, when the Joker was a campy TV character, less than 5% of Americans said they would be upset if their child married someone from the opposite party. By 2019, when Joaquin Phoenix introduced his much darker version, more than one-third of Republicans and nearly half of Democrats said they would be unhappy if their child made this choice, according to research from PRRI.

In fiction, villains have such deep character flaws that they seem unredeemable. To paraphrase Fyodor Dostoyevsky, "Nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer; nothing is harder than to understand him."

Once we've decided someone is a villain, it is hard to change this perception. Policy disagreements become entangled with personal identity,

what author Lilliana Mason calls "mega-identities" that lead to emotionally charged reactions. Political attacks are seen as personal attacks.

In fiction, as in real life, we sometimes judge people without understanding their origin story. In recent years, movies like *Maleficent* and *Wicked* have reexamined the motivations of traditionally evil characters. *Maleficent* suffers terrible abuse that turns her into a vengeful figure. The witch Elphaba is vilified for standing up to the Wizard's regime. When you dig deeper into a villain's backstory, their evilness can begin to unravel.

While it's tempting to cast the other side as a villain, our disagreements are more often a result of different life experiences. Voters on the left want policies that level the playing field, while people on the right worry about giving special treatment. Voters on the left embrace the nation's increasing diversity, while those on the right fear losing national identity. Even in this divided climate, voters say they want compromise and shared solutions. When cooperation on Capitol Hill is lacking, it's up to us mortals to set the example.

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Joseph Campbell was one of the most important figures in storytelling. Movies like *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* draw from his insights about character archetypes — the hero, the villain, the mentor and the trickster, for instance — that convey deep truths about the human experience.

In Campbell's framework, the villain, or what he calls "The Shadow," is the dark side of human nature. But importantly, the shadow isn't entirely separate from the hero. The light and shadow are linked, like two halves of a greater whole. In fact, the two often

share an important connection. Think of Harry Potter and Voldemort, or Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader. Through their conflict, the villain teaches the hero something about themselves.

How can we learn from people with whom we disagree? With the decline in civic engagement and shared media, it takes more work to discover a person's origin story. The solution may involve small steps to increase understanding. Make friends with someone who has different views than you do. Volunteer with a local civic organization or sign up to be a poll worker. Get your news from a variety of sources. Approach people with curiosity so that you might learn from their experience.

The new *Joker* film is subtitled *Folie à Deux* — "shared delusion" or "madness for two." Although voters increasingly describe people from the other party as deluded, it turns out we have the same madness. The truth is, we're all citizens of the same town, seeking the light — the only heroes in this story.

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