E-Block

A Defense for Villains (Rewrite)

The battle between good and evil is an overdone concept exemplified throughout much of literature. Often, novels fail to address the possibility that their characters, even the villains, can have more grey qualities instead of either white or black. As readers explore the three unique works, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, *Antigone*, by Sophocles, and *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, by Gabriel García Márquez, they watch as the authors weave fear into their characters Nanny, Creon, and the Vicario brothers. These villains become so paralyzed by their fears that, as the storyline progresses, the consequences of the villains’ static natures are revealed. Villains are villains, but they’re villains for a reason. Used to comment on the complexity of morality in a world governed by fear, these characters challenge society’s previous conception of the one dimensional villain. Furthermore, the way these authors present their antagonists displays the power literature has when it comes to evoking ambivalent feelings from readers. Hurston, Sophocles, and Márquez seem to argue that although some of the villains’ actions are undeniably despicable, they may be understood through the very human pox of fear, whether it be fear of risk, of chaos, or of societal pressure .

Out of the three villains , Nanny’s fear of risk is arguably the most personal, as it stems from an excruciatingly painful past. In the beginning of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston creates a complex character tortured by her experiences as a former slave. Nanny is scarred and remnants of her painful memories bleed into her reality. Hurston paints an image of Nanny weeping internally for both Janie and herself while promising, “Yo’ Nanny wouldn’t harm a hair uh yo’ head. She don’t want nobody else to do it neither… de white man is de ruler… de n\*gger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see” (14). Nanny’s greatest fear is the risk of losing her granddaughter, Janie, to the world, a world that she has seen too much of. She knows that she will not be able to protect Janie forever, and so she barricades her in a marriage with Logan Killicks, an older, ugly, and repulsive man. She might as well have locked Janie in a cold, empty safe. Of course, because of this, Janie sees Nanny as the root cause of her great unhappiness. After Janie leaves Logan on a quest for true love, she bitterly recounts how Nanny had claimed to want the best for her, but then cheated her into trading passionate desire for submissive security. She claims that “Nanny belonged to that other kind that loved to deal in scraps…. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love” (89). At first glance, it is completely reasonable that Janie be upset with her grandmother. Yet Nanny’s character practically demands sympathy from the reader. Nanny deals in scraps because, for most of her life, scraps were all that she had. Of course she wants to protect Janie, her only family. She did her best, but the true tragedy of Nanny’s story is that her good intentions become more of a threat to Janie’s happiness instead. Her fear of risks, of the ‘could-happens,’ and of the ‘what-ifs’ paralyzes her mentality to a point where she forgets that life is supposed to be vulnerable to change and is dynamic by nature. It’s not natural to shelter Janie in a big bubble forever, but even though Nanny’s fear of risk skews her purpose, readers still can’t blame her. Rather, the world of rape, murder, and inhumanity that warped Nanny is to blame. It’s as if Hurston dares the reader to vilify Nanny, especially in the last lines of chapter two when Nanny pleads, “Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah’m a cracked plate” (20).

While Nanny was less of a stereotypical antagonist, King Creon from *Antigone* is definitely more of an obvious one. Creon’s downfall is caused by his hubris. But as readers begin peeling back the layers of Creon’s character, they discover that at the core of Creon’s fault is his fear of chaos. In fact, throughout *Antigone*, there is a constant conflict between chaos and order. Creon’s mentality is best summarized by the Chorus when they exclaim, “when the laws are kept, how proudly his city stands! / When laws are broken, what of his city then? / Never may the anárchic man find rest at my hearth / Never be it said that my thoughts are his thoughts” (204). In the beginning, Creon seems reasonable. Add in the fact that his kingdom is recovering from a civil war, and Creon’s priority of maintaining a compliant population is actually wise. Here, readers can already sympathize with Creon, a traumatized king shaken by a war caused by disobedience and rebellion. However, Creon becomes obsessed with his fear of chaos to the point where it becomes compulsive. After sentencing Antigone to death for defying his law, he argues against his son Haimon that to obey the State is to uphold order, asserting that, “The State is the King!” to which Haimon replies, “Yes, if the State is a desert” (221). Creon forgets that although one voice is clear and easily heard, there is more than just one voice in a kingdom. He is blinded by his fear of losing his power to chaos, of losing his voice under a loud sea of others. The more Antigone threatens to topple his orderly empire with her disobedience, the more alarmed a he is. His hysteria grows, accusing others of being “stiff-necked anarchists, putting their heads together, scheming against me… and they have bribed my own guard to do this thing” (201). In the end, he becomes just another tyrant, yet by the end of play, when Creon is confronted by divine punishment and loses Haimon, his wife, and his will to live, the audience is also confronted. Creon was too late in realizing his mistakes and recognizing his fear. But what about the reader? Humanity’s greatest fears stem from disorder: the fear of a cluttered inbox, of falling, of fighting a losing battle, of feeling helpless in the midst of disaster. Ultimately, Creon’s fear of chaos is actually a reflection of humanity’s own compulsive need to be in control. His hysteria, his anger, and his frustration are all so unfortunately understandable. Like Creon, humans are selfish, arrogant, and controlling. Like Creon, the mighty will fall due to these faults. Thus, although Creon’s fear of chaos overtook him and everyone he loved, his suffering is what minimizes him down to just another person, something readers may identify within themselves.

Márquez’s usage of the Vicario brothers is arguably the most transparent comment on humanity between all three works of literature. As *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* unfolds, readers uncomfortably watch as the Vicario brothers “gave [Nasar] a horizontal slash on the stomach, and all his intestines exploded out.” (119). No one can deny the barbaric nature of Santiago Nasar’s murder. However, while the brothers’ actions cannot be defended, their following statements are extremely revealing: “‘We killed him openly, Pedro Vicario said, ‘but we’re innocent.’ … ‘Before God and before men,’ Pablo Vicario said. ‘It was a matter of honor’” (49). Pedro and Pablo’s situation is a case of misguided machismo, or strong and dominant masculinity. While positive aspects of it include chivalry and independence, extreme machismo breeds arrogance and aggression. Therefore, when Angela Vicario, the Vicarios’ sister, is allegedly defiled by Nasar, the Vicario brothers avenge her honor by slaughtering him. However, while the brothers claim that they are innocent, do they truly believe that? The Vicarios brothers seem to reveal that they were actually afraid of the machismo within societal norms. Throughout the novel, machismo within society evidently influences everything the brothers do, from drinking rotgut rum in the morning to shaving with a butcher knife (63). The exaggerated toxic norms of masculinity imposed upon the them by society ultimately pressure them to murder Nasar. Take Pablo’s fiance Prudencia Cotes, for example, as she claims, “‘I never would have married him if he hadn’t done what a man should do’ (62). The brothers didn’t actually want to kill Nasar. In fact, a recurring theme is the brothers’ willingness to tell anyone about their plans. Since no one stopped them, they proceeded with their crime. The Vicario brothers lacked the agency to change their situation, but is that completely their fault ? Or rather, were they victims of societal pressure? They were so disgusted by their actions, that in order to actually murder Nasar, the twins floated into subconsciousness as “they both kept on knifing him against the door with alternate and easy stabs, floating in the dazzling backwater they had found on the other side of fear” (118). There shouldn’t be any fear if one truly believes themself to be innocent. The Vicarios’ were aware of the wickedness of their act. Fear of societal image, shame, norms, and pressure, tore into the Vicario brothers’ morals, leading them to make the wrong decision. Although sympathy may be hard to come by, the reader can understand where the brothers’ distorted mentality came from, like when Clotilde Armenta grieves for “those poor boys [and] the horrible duty that’s fallen on them” (57). Due to the pressure of cultural machismo, the Vicario brothers had almost no choice but to react the way they did. Both Santiago Nasar’s fate and the brothers’ fates were sealed the moment they realized that honor was at stake.

Humans like to think of themselves as the heroes of their narratives. But the truth is, there’s a bit of a villain in every person. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, *Antigone*, by Sophocles, and *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, by Gabriel García Márquez, reveal both the best and the worst in their antagonists. From an overprotective guardian, to a king striving for a peaceful orderly kingdom, to two young men struggling to conform to societal pressure, Nanny, Creon, and the Vicario brothers all start with good intentions. They are not just defined by their antagonist characteristics. Over the course of the novels, these characters actually fit the definition of a tragic hero. It turns out that these characters, these tragic heroes, do not only have tragic flaws, but more specifically, they have fatal fears. These fears influence their actions within each story, and as readers encounter them, they often forget that fear is not just unique to villains. It’s a very present ghost haunting all of humanity and these characters are so universally identifiable. Readers identify in the fear of risk, whether it be asking a crush to prom or journeying on a quest for true love. Readers identify in the fear of chaos, whether it be controlling a group project or of defying order to do the right thing. Readers identify in the fear of society, whether it be conforming to peer pressure or refusing to bend for others. We all want to be Janie and not Nanny, Antigone and not Creon, and anyone but the Vicario brothers. But frankly, that’s impossible. Perhaps the reason humanity loves to hate villains so much is because they boldly reveal their most hidden controversial and conflicted feelings. They show us how much humans fear the truth in their own lives; we crucify these villains because they possess the very traits we despise in ourselves.. But that’s the beauty of these pieces of literature. They evoke discourse and discussion. They throw readers off their pedestals and demand that they identify with the most shocking thing: a villain

Works Cited

Hurston, Zora. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. 1937. HarperCollins Publishers. New York.

Márquez, Gabriel. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. 1982. Random House, Inc. New York

Sophocles. *Antigone*. 1939. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. New York.

Summary Paragraph:

In my original essay, my biggest issues were the introductory paragraph and the concluding paragraph. That’s where I put most of my focus on. Throughout the rest of the essay, I just made some minor edits on word choice, grammar and mechanics, and syntax. I think my biggest issue in the original draft was that I used too much “fluff” and my tone was off. This time around, I wanted my paper to be purely analytical, getting straight to the point and the important evidence and analysis. That’s the mindset I used when I edited my introductory paragraph, cutting out the first few lines and replacing them with more formal sentences. That’s also how I edited to conclusion paragraph and I got rid of the beginning fluff informal tone. Throughout the main body paragraphs, I mostly went off of the comments made on the first draft and honed in on my word choice. I realized that the actual definition of a lot of my words that I used didn’t fit in the context of what I was trying to write. For instance, relatable doesn’t mean what I wanted it to mean. I wanted it to mean how many people can sympathize with the actions of the villains. In the end, I used “identify,” because that was more applicable and fitting. Humans can identify within the villains a little bit of themselves.