

“The Force” of Perception: How Star Wars Episode 3 Transforms Darth Vader from a Villain to Hero in the Audience’s Eyes

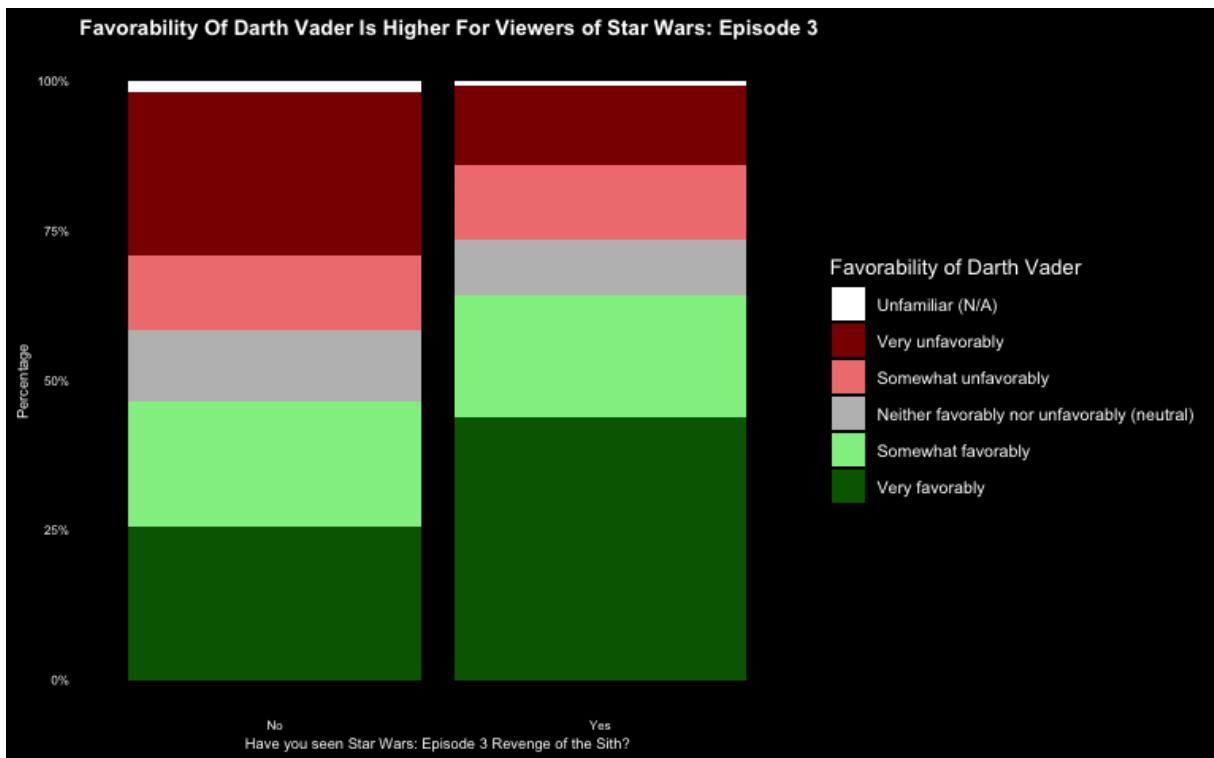
By Curtis Leaver

When we watch and follow a good film or story, there is a unique question that we can ask as viewers. How could the villain be loved in these films and stories? Is the villain genuinely loved? One of the most famous and compelling villains of all stories would have to be Darth Vader. Even though he is one of the most infamous villains, he is widely loved by fans of the Star Wars franchise. How does this compare to “viewers” of Star Wars, but not necessarily “fans?” One of the most pivotal films in the Star Wars saga would be Episode 3: Revenge of the Sith. This is an important turn point for the Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader character because this movie shows how Anakin turned to the “dark side” and became Darth Vader. Any viewer of the film would be able empathize with Darth Vader and know his reason for turning to the dark side after watching the events of the movie unfold. So, I figured that with the found data, we could answer this question: Does the opinion of Darth Vader change based on if a viewer of the Star Wars saga has seen Episode 3?

The dataset that I found online is a dataset made at FiveThirtyEight, which is a popular data company that is owned by ABC News, and a very credible source. The basis of the dataset is a survey with over 1,000 observations and includes questions about their relationship with the Star Wars franchise. The types of questions that they ask include things like “Have you seen any 6 of the films in the Star Wars franchise,” “Rank the Star Wars movies in order,” or demographic questions like gender, age, or household income. Although answering a question about the data relating to demographics and its relation to Star Wars would have been useful, I find it more

useful and interesting to focus purely on Star Wars data, being a Star Wars fan. Therefore, I knew that evaluating the opinion of a character would be the most variable result that is less easy to predict and more interesting to visualize. I also did not want to compare the popularity of two or more characters, as that is obvious to predict if you know the characters well enough intuitively. So, I knew that evaluating a controversial character like Darth Vader would be the best option because, honestly, I did now know how well he would be liked by the survey respondents.

Finally, I thought about which films would lead to a far different perspective on Darth Vader compared to the perspective that he is “evil,” since he is one of the most arching characters. Episodes 3 and 6 came to mind because each is the final film of their respective trilogy and contains the most development for Darth Vader/Anakin Skywalker. I chose to visualize Episode 3 over Episode 6 because Episode 6 shows when Darth Vader turns back to the “light side,” so he would obviously be more favorable for people who have seen it. So, overall, I chose to evaluate Darth Vader’s popularity based on if a person has seen Episode 3, because this is when Darth Vader turns to the “dark side,” so the relationship would be more interesting and inexplicable.



When we look at this graph, we can clearly see that the favorability of Darth Vader is significantly higher after the viewing of Star Wars Episode 3. The column on the left includes all the people in the dataset who have seen Star Wars, but not Episode 3. The column on the right includes all the people in the dataset who have seen Star Wars Episode 3. Additionally, the legend indicates the 6 response levels, which are color coded on the bars. The middle four levels of favorability ("unfamiliar," "somewhat unfavorably," "neither," and "somewhat favorably") do not seem to change very much in terms of the eye test. However, after viewing Episode 3, there are massive changes in the "very favorably" and "very unfavorably" responses. For viewers of Star Wars who have not seen Episode 3, only about 25% of people had a very favorable opinion of Darth Vader. Additionally, about 30% of them responded saying that they had a very unfavorable opinion of Darth Vader. However, for viewers of Star Wars who had seen Episode 3, a whopping 45% of people responded that they had a very favorable opinion of Darth Vader.

Alongside that, only about 12% responded that they had a very unfavorable opinion of Darth Vader. These are massive changes in the responses, which indicate that watching Episode 3 has an incredibly significant impact on people's opinion of Darth Vader.

Darth Vader, as one of the most iconically evil movie characters, experiences a profound transformation in audience perception through a good story and character arc. These findings and visualizations illustrate that even the most despised and evil characters can evoke empathy with the right narrative elements. A key takeaway is that audience perception can be heavily influenced by storytelling and character development in a film.

In this example, Episode 3, with its portrayal of Anakin Skywalker's transformation into Darth Vader, emerges as a key turning point that significantly shapes viewers' opinions. The narrative arc, emotional depth, and complexity brought to the character in this film contribute to a more profound understanding, leading to a higher favorability among the audience. It becomes clear that the power of storytelling, character arcs, and narrative twists can heavily influence how viewers connect with and perceive even the most iconic villains in cinematic history. The unique and sometimes unexpected journey of characters like Darth Vader adds depth to their character, making them not just symbols of evil, but intricate and compelling figures that stimulate the audience's imagination and empathy.

In conclusion, the data analysis reveals a compelling shift in the perception of Darth Vader among viewers of the Star Wars saga based on whether they have seen Episode 3: Revenge of the Sith. The dataset, sourced from FiveThirtyEight, provides valuable insights into the dynamics of audience opinion surrounding this iconic character, which can be seen in the visualization.