



Beyond Evil: Reconstructing the Literary Antagonist in Discourse and Power

Dr. Anupamratanshanker Nagar
Principal, Gurukul Mahila Arts and Commerce College, Arya Kanya Tapobhumi,
Porbandar, Gujarat, India

Abstract

This paper offers a comparative analysis of major antagonistic figures- Satan, Iago, Shylock, Alec D'Urberville, and Roger Chillingworth—to examine the shifting construction of villainy across literary traditions. Moving beyond rigid moral binaries, the study foregrounds psychological interiority, rhetorical performance, and socio-cultural marginality as key dimensions shaping these characters. Drawing on psychoanalytic, Foucauldian, feminist, and postcolonial frameworks, it reinterprets these figures as products of discursive power, ideological constraint, and subjective rationalization. Through close engagement with texts such as *Paradise Lost*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *The Scarlet Letter*, the paper traces a broader transition from metaphysical conceptions of evil to modern and postmodern ambiguity. It argues that the literary antagonist is not a fixed moral entity but a dynamic, relational construct shaped as much by interpretive frameworks as by narrative design.

Keywords: Psychological Interiority, Discourse and Power, Marginality, Postcolonialism, Feminism, Moral Ambiguity.

Introduction: Reframing Villainy

The figure of the villain has conventionally been positioned within a rigid moral binary, functioning as the constitutive “Other” against which virtue is stabilized and affirmed. Canonical figures such as Satan, Iago, Shylock, Alec D'Urberville and Roger Chillingworth have thus been historically assimilated into a reductive ethical paradigm that privileges moral absolutism and narrative closure. Such a framework, however, obscures the complex interplay of psychic interiority, socio-historical conditioning and discursive production that shapes the construction of villainy.

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This study adopts a comparative and interdisciplinary methodology to challenge such essentialist readings by positing villainy as a contingent and discursively mediated phenomenon. From a psychoanalytic perspective, these figures may be understood as sites of repression, projection and fractured subjectivity, wherein desire and lack are narrativized through acts of transgression. A Foucauldian lens further reveals how villainy is embedded within regimes of power/knowledge, where discourse not only represents but actively produces deviance. At the same time, feminist and postcolonial critiques interrogate the ideological structures that encode certain bodies and identities as “villainous,” exposing the operations of patriarchy, marginalization and processes of othering. By synthesizing these theoretical frameworks, the study reconceptualizes the antagonist not as a fixed moral entity but as a dynamic, relational construct - one that emerges at the intersection of narrative strategy, ideological inscription and readerly interpretation.

Conceptual Grounding: Defining the Villain

The evolution of villainy reflects broader epistemic and ideological shifts within intellectual history, marking a transition from metaphysical essentialism to psychological and discursive constructions. In early modern literature, Satan functions as an archetypal figure of metaphysical rebellion, situated within a providential cosmology that frames evil as transgression against divine teleology. His defiance - articulated through elevated epic rhetoric such as

What though the field be lost?
All is not lost - the unconquerable will,
And courage never to submit or yield.

(Milton, I.242-44)

paradoxically generates a counter-discourse of autonomy, rendering him both antagonist and proto-modern subject.

By contrast, Iago signals a decisive shift toward psychological interiority and epistemological instability. Devoid of a stable motive, he exemplifies what may be termed performative villainy, wherein meaning is produced through linguistic manipulation, strategic opacity, and the destabilization of truth claims, as in his insinuations to Othello: “I speak not yet of proof” (Shakespeare, 3.3.185). His assertion, “I am not what I am” (Shakespeare, 1.1.65), encapsulates a profound crisis of identity.

Michel Foucault’s reconceptualization of power as diffuse, relational, and productive - rather than sovereign and repressive - provides a critical framework for re-reading these figures. Foucault asserts, “power is everywhere...because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 93), thereby displacing the notion of evil as mere aberration. Within this paradigm, Iago’s insinuations and Satan’s persuasive rhetoric may be understood as micro-practices of power that actively produce regimes of truth rather than simply subvert them. Villainy thus emerges not as a deviation from order but as embedded within discursive networks, where agency operates through the circulation of knowledge, surveillance, and interpretive control.

Psychological Interiority and Self-Justification

A defining feature of these antagonists is their capacity for self-legitimation, whereby ethical transgression is narrativized as necessity or moral right. Satan constructs a rhetoric of heroic defiance that reconfigures rebellion as a claim to autonomy, as in his declaration:

Here at least
We shall be free; th’ Almighty hath not built
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence”

(Milton, I.258-60),

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effectively displacing divine sovereignty with a proto-modern assertion of selfhood. His insistence on self-rule may be read, in psychoanalytic terms, as a compensatory formation - an attempt to master loss through symbolic rearticulation.

By contrast, Iago operates through a protean logic of motivation, offering inconsistent and often contradictory justifications- such as his feigned loyalty masked by resentment: “I hate the Moor” (Shakespeare, 1.3.364) shifting to

I humbly do beseech you of your pardon
For too much loving you. (3.3.212)

that foreground the instability of intention itself. This fluidity aligns with Sigmund Freud’s account of repression and projection in *The Ego* and the *Id*, wherein unacceptable desires are displaced and re-inscribed as rational motives.

Roger Chillingworth exemplifies obsessive interiority taken to a pathological extreme, his subjectivity progressively colonized by a singular drive for vengeance, evident when he vows:

I shall pursue him [...] There can be [...] no living for him, unless he detects my secret and takes revenge upon me” (Hawthorne, ch. 4).

His transformation from wronged husband to spectral avenger illustrates the Freudian return of the repressed, as psychic injury is internalized and re-enacted through compulsive surveillance and control. Freud’s model of the unconscious thus illuminates how such figures sustain their actions not through coherent moral reasoning but through deeply embedded psychic scripts. Villainy, in this sense, is less an ethical category than a mode of subject formation, produced through the interplay of desire, repression, and narrative self-fashioning.

Language, Performance and Discursive Power

Language functions as a central mechanism in the production of villainy, operating not merely as a medium of expression but as a performative force that helps construct reality itself. Iago exemplifies this dynamic through his strategic use of implication, equivocation, and calculated silence, as when he plants doubt with “O, beware, my lord, of jealousy; / It is the green-ey’d monster” (Shakespeare, 3.3.165-66), feigning concern while orchestrating mistrust. His discourse does not simply describe events; it actively produces them by manipulating perception and orchestrating epistemic doubt. Meaning, in Iago’s case, is never fixed but constantly deferred, revealing both the instability of truth claims and the susceptibility of subjects to rhetorical control. Similarly, Satan mobilizes elevated and persuasive rhetoric to construct a counter-ideology that challenges divine authority, declaring to his legions: Awake, arise, or be for ever fall’n” (Milton, I.330), reframing subjugation as tyranny and rebellion as liberation. His speeches illustrate how discourse can invert normative moral frameworks.

Michel Foucault’s theorization of discourse as a productive force - one that generates knowledge and thereby constitutes power- provides a crucial lens for interpreting these figures. If power circulates through regimes of truth, then both Iago and Satan can be understood as agents who reshape such regimes through linguistic intervention. Within this framework, Shylock’s courtroom speech emerges as a critical site of discursive contestation:

Hath not a Jew eyes? [...]
If you prick us, do we not bleed? [...]
If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility?

Revenge.

(Shakespeare, 3.1.55-73).

His articulation of shared humanity - insisting on common affect and vulnerability - functions as a counter-discourse that interrogates dominant Christian hegemony. Yet this assertion is simultaneously constrained by the very structures it seeks to resist, underscoring the ambivalence of marginalized speech. Villainy, therefore, is not simply enacted through deeds but is discursively constituted, negotiated, and contested within competing regimes of meaning.

Marginality, Power and Representation

The category of the villain is inextricable from structures of marginality and power, revealing how literary antagonism is often ideologically produced rather than ethically inherent. Shylock, positioned as a Jewish outsider within a dominant Christian mercantile culture, exemplifies what Edward Said theorizes as the construction of the “Other” in Orientalism. Although Said’s framework emerges from colonial discourse, its logic of exclusion - wherein difference is codified as threat - resonates strongly in Shylock’s representation, particularly his rigid demand:

The pound of flesh [...] must be by nature, weight, and size,

No jot of bread.

(Shakespeare, 4.1.324-25).

His insistence on justice through the bond is read not merely as legalism but as cultural excess, thereby exposing how hegemonic discourse pathologizes alterity. At the same time, his appeal to shared humanity destabilizes this construction, rendering him a site of interpretive tension between demonization and empathy.

Conversely, Alec D’Urberville embodies the normalized operations of patriarchal and class-based dominance. Unlike Shylock, whose marginality marks him as visibly “other,” Alec’s power derives from his embeddedness within hegemonic structures that naturalize his authority, as in his seductive manipulation:

Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess? [...]

Why, then, I should get down on my knees and thank the Lord.

(Hardy, ch. 10).

Feminist criticism has foregrounded how his coercion of Tess is less an instance of individual moral failure than a manifestation of systemic gendered violence, in which consent is obscured by economic dependency and social vulnerability. His actions thus illustrate how power operates through institutional sanction rather than overt transgression.

Taken together, these figures demonstrate that villainy is not a stable moral category but a discursive effect shaped by ideological formations. Whether through the stigmatization of difference or the normalization of dominance, the “villain” emerges as a reflection of the cultural anxieties and power structures that produce and sustain it.

Surveillance and the Knowledge-Power Nexus

Roger Chillingworth exemplifies the insidious fusion of knowledge and control wherein epistemic authority becomes a mechanism of domination. His covert scrutiny of Dimmesdale operates less as a quest for truth than as a sustained exercise in psychological penetration, aligning closely with Michel Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish*. For Foucault, surveillance functions as an internalizing force, producing subjects who regulate themselves under the gaze of an unseen observer. Chillingworth’s role as physician grants him privileged access to Dimmesdale’s body and psyche, as he probes: “Wouldst thou therefore [...] have me torture thee with the truth?” (Hawthorne, ch. 10), transforming medical knowledge into an instrument of coercion. His power lies not in overt action but in the gradual

colonization of another's interiority, rendering domination both intimate and invisible.

A parallel dynamic is evident in Iago, whose efficacy depends on strategic opacity and self-effacement. Operating from the margins of visibility, he manipulates the flow of information, selectively revealing and withholding knowledge - as in his staged "discovery" of Desdemona's handkerchief, where he exclaims to Cassio: "Look, sir, here's the handkerchief too" (Shakespeare, 3.4.156) after earlier planting suspicion: "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul" (3.3.82) to engineer Othello's epistemic collapse. His villainy is thus not grounded in physical violence but in cognitive infiltration, where control is exerted through the management of perception and belief.

Together, these figures illustrate how villainy emerges through the tactical deployment of knowledge within asymmetrical power relations. Rather than occupying positions of overt authority, they exploit the micro-physics of power - circulating through observation, inference, and interpretive control. In this sense, the antagonist becomes less a transgressor of order than a producer of it, shaping reality by determining what can be known, seen, and ultimately believed.

World Literature and Moral Ambiguity

In modern and postcolonial literature, the figure of the antagonist increasingly resists stable moral categorization, signalling a decisive shift from essentialist constructions of evil to historically and culturally mediated subjectivities. Rather than embodying a fixed ethical opposition, such figures emerge as products of displacement, fractured identity, and ideological contestation. This transformation reflects broader theoretical movements that interrogate the coherence of the self, foregrounding instead the instability and hybridity of identity in contexts shaped by colonial histories and global modernity. Antagonists in these traditions often inhabit liminal spaces - simultaneously complicit in and resistant to dominant structures - thereby complicating conventional binaries of victim and perpetrator.

This reconfiguration aligns closely with Edward Said's assertion that identities are not innate but discursively produced within regimes of representation. In *Orientalism*, Said demonstrates how cultural narratives construct and fix the "Other" through reiterative practices of description and classification. Extending this insight, the modern antagonist can be read as a site where such discourses are both internalized and contested - as seen in Alec d'Urberville's hypocritical return as a preacher, preaching repentance while evading his own: "I have been thinking [...] that there is no use in doing good to people who don't want it" (Hardy, ch. 47) rendering villainy a positional effect contingent upon shifting interpretive frameworks and power relations.

Consequently, the antagonist in world literature is no longer a figure of pure negation but one of epistemological uncertainty, embodying tensions between agency and structure and autonomy and determination. This paradigm foregrounds villainy as a fluid and relational category, continually reconstituted through historical context and discursive negotiation.

Reader-Response and Interpretive Agency

Reader-response theory further destabilizes the category of villainy by foregrounding the constitutive role of interpretation in the production of meaning. Wolfgang Iser argues in *The Implied Reader*, the text is not a self-sufficient repository of fixed meanings but a site of interaction, activated through the reader's interpretive participation. Meaning, in this framework, emerges through the negotiation of textual "gaps" and indeterminacies, which

invite readers to construct coherence based on their own historical, cultural, and ideological positioning.

This theoretical lens is particularly productive when applied to figures such as Shylock and Satan, whose moral status remains persistently unstable. Shylock, once read predominantly as a caricature of avarice, has increasingly been reinterpreted as a tragic figure shaped by systemic exclusion and cultural prejudice, filling the “gap” in his forced conversion: “I am not bound to please thee with my answer”. (Shakespeare, 4.1.1). Similarly, Satan’s eloquence and defiant rhetoric e.g., “Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heav’n” (Milton, l.263) - have led some readers to construe him as a heroic or proto-Romantic rebel rather than a purely malevolent force. These divergent readings underscore the extent to which villainy is not definitively inscribed within the text but is co-produced through readerly engagement.

Consequently, the antagonist emerges as a fluid construct, contingent upon interpretive communities and shifting critical paradigms. Reader-response theory thus suggests that villainy is less an ontological category than a hermeneutic effect, continually reconstituted through acts of reading that reflect broader cultural and ideological transformations.

Toward a New Model of Villainy

As the foregoing analysis demonstrates, the literary antagonist cannot be reduced to a stable moral category but must instead be understood as a relational construct produced at the intersection of multiple, overlapping forces. Figures such as Satan, Iago, Shylock, Alec D’Urberville, and Roger Chillingworth illustrate how villainy emerges through processes of psychological self-fashioning, wherein subjects construct justificatory narratives that sustain transgressive action - e.g., Satan’s “unconquerable will” (Milton, l.242); Iago’s “I am not what I am” (Shakespeare, 1.1.65). At the same time, their agency is mediated through discursive and rhetorical power, as language functions not merely as a representational medium but as a performative force shaping regimes of truth and perception.

Equally significant is the role of socio-political marginality, which determines how certain figures are marked as deviant or threatening within dominant ideological frameworks - Shylock’s “Hath not a Jew eyes?” (Shakespeare, 3.1.55) - while others, like Alec’s coercive “stars were worlds” (Hardy, ch. 10), exercise normalized forms of authority. This dynamic is further complicated by structures of surveillance and control, through which knowledge becomes a mechanism of domination - Chillingworth’s “torture thee with the truth?” (Hawthorne, ch. 10) - enabling antagonists to operate within diffuse networks of power. These dimensions do not operate in isolation but intersect to produce complex configurations of subjectivity and agency.

Accordingly, this study advances a model of villainy that rejects essentialist definitions in favour of a fluid and contextual understanding. The antagonist emerges not as an embodiment of inherent evil but as a discursive effect- one that is continually negotiated through psychological processes, cultural structures, and interpretive practices. Such a reconceptualization not only reorients the study of canonical figures but also opens new avenues for examining the ethical and ideological stakes of antagonism across literary traditions.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of figures such as Satan, Iago, Shylock, Alec D’Urberville, and Roger Chillingworth demonstrates that villainy cannot be understood as an inherent or essential attribute but must instead be recognized as a product of narrative construction, ideological conditioning, and interpretive engagement. Across these texts, the antagonist emerges not as a fixed embodiment of evil but as a dynamic figure shaped by psychological interiority, discursive strategies, and socio-political positioning. Such a perspective challenges traditional

moral binaries that have long governed literary criticism, replacing them with a more nuanced understanding of character as relational and contingent.

By integrating multiple theoretical frameworks - psychoanalysis, Foucauldian discourse theory, feminist critique, postcolonial thought, and reader-response theory - this study redefines the antagonist as a site of complexity and contestation. Psychoanalytic approaches illuminate processes of self-legitimation, repression, and projection, revealing how figures such as Satan - "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heav'n" (Milton, l.263) - and Iago sustain their actions through internalized narratives rather than coherent ethical reasoning. At the same time, Foucauldian insights into the diffuse and productive nature of power underscore how villainy operates through language, surveillance, and the strategic circulation of knowledge. Characters such as Iago and Chillingworth exemplify this dynamic, demonstrating that control is often exercised not through overt force but through the subtle manipulation of perception and information.

Feminist and postcolonial perspectives further expose how villainy is entangled with structures of marginality and dominance. Shylock's position as a cultural outsider - "Hath not a Jew eyes?" (Shakespeare, 3.1.55) - and Alec D'Urberville's embodiment of patriarchal privilege reveal how ideological frameworks shape both the construction and reception of antagonistic figures. These approaches challenge the assumption that villainy is purely individual, situating it instead within broader systems of power that produce and sustain inequality. Reader-response theory complicates this account by emphasizing the role of the audience in constituting meaning. As interpretations of these characters shift across historical and cultural contexts, it becomes evident that villainy is not fixed within the text but emerges through acts of reading that reflect changing ethical sensibilities.

This reconceptualization not only enriches our understanding of canonical works but also aligns with broader transformations in literary and ethical thought. In an intellectual climate increasingly attentive to ambiguity, multiplicity, and the instability of meaning, the figure of the antagonist serves as a crucial site for examining the intersections of agency, power, and identity. By moving beyond reductive categorizations, this study highlights the ways in which literature both reflects and interrogates the complexities of human experience.

At the end, to read the antagonist as a constructed and contested figure is to acknowledge the fluidity of moral judgment itself. Villainy, far from being a stable or universal category, emerges as a shifting phenomenon- continuously produced, negotiated, and reinterpreted through the interplay of narrative form, ideological discourse, and readerly engagement. Such an approach not only redefines the boundaries of literary analysis but also opens new possibilities for understanding the ethical dimensions of storytelling in a global and historically dynamic context.

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Bio-note:

Dr. Anupam R. Nagar is an eminent academician and higher education administrator serving as the Principal of Gurukul Mahila Arts & Commerce College, Porbandar, Gujarat, India. He holds several significant academic and administrative responsibilities, contributing to the governance, development, and advancement of higher education in Gujarat. Dr. Nagar is a Member of the Academic Council and Associate Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Bhakta Kavi Narsinh Mehta University, Junagadh. He also serves as a Member of the Executive Council of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University, Ahmedabad. In recognition of his academic and administrative engagement, he has previously served as a Member of the Executive Council and the Board of Governance of Bhakta Kavi Narsinh Mehta University, Junagadh. Through his leadership in institutional administration and participation in university-level academic and governance bodies, Dr. Nagar contributes to the promotion of academic excellence, institutional development, and the strengthening of higher education. His professional journey reflects a commitment to educational leadership and the effective administration of higher educational institutions.

Email: Id: dranupamnagar09@gmail.com

