



**HEROINE'S HANDBOOK**

***Villainesses***

## *Welcome!*

The Heroine's Handbook is a project by Super Heroines, Etc. Founded in 2012, Super Heroines, Etc. is a 501c3 non-profit organization that empowers women to embrace their inner nerd through programs in local chapters, speaking out at conventions, and our online work in fighting for equity and representation of women in geek culture. This Heroine's Handbook will help you examine the tropes associated with villainesses and apply your knowledge to advocating for change in geek media. Our goal and hope is that you will use your knowledge for good and fight for more diversity in the storytelling of villainesses.

## *Villainesses: an Origin Story*

What is a villainess? Google defines a villainess as: **noun. (in a film, novel, or play) a female character whose evil actions or motives are important to the plot.**

Villainesses have been an integral part of stories and storytelling since the beginning. From the wicked witch in countless western fairy tales to the shape shifting seductress in eastern folklore to Eve and the forbidden fruit, who by definition could be considered a villainess in her own right, villainesses have time and time again been the counter to our brave protagonists.

Many have said that a good villain makes a story, and the same is undoubtedly true of their female counterparts. How many of us have fallen just a little more in love with Maleficent than Aurora after a few watchings of Sleeping Beauty? Villainesses are strong, driven, independent, and fascinating characters, but many times they are also shallow, one dimensional, and often pigeon-holed into the same tired tropes.

What do these tropes say about how these characters tend to be approached and developed? And, perhaps more importantly, what do they say about what society fears about women and femininity?

***ALL I WANT IS TO BE MY OWN WOMAN.  
... AND DESTROY MANKIND.***



# *Spare the Villainess and Other Harmful Tropes*

As with many female and female-identifying characters presented in geek media, villainesses tend to fall into certain tropes<sup>1</sup> that not only define their personalities, goals, drives, and actions but speak to even larger cultural ideas about what it means to be a woman in western society.

## COMMON TROPES FOUND IN MEDIA (AND BEYOND)

The following is a list of common tropes that we've broken down into their basic elements.

**THE HAG:** This is an old, unpleasant, and unattractive woman who many times uses magical forces to thwart the protagonist. Most often shown as a witch, she is unrepentantly evil and will use whatever means to achieve what she wants whether it's her sister's shoes (the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz*) or to eat hapless children (the witch from *Hansel and Gretel*).

**WHAT THIS REVEALS:** From the earliest fairy tales, the hag/witch of this type was a woman who tended to live alone, who was independent, who didn't care for - or worse wanted to harm - children, was old, unattractive, and unpleasant. These early stories served as moral tales and again and again depicted independence, age, lack of beauty, unfriendliness, and dislike of children as not only undesirable but evil. Even as media has evolved and developed, many times these same attributes are applied to this type of villainess.

**THE EVIL QUEEN/MATRIARCH:** This is a mature woman who is in a position of power and crushes the spirits (or bodies, as the case may be) of those beneath her when her vanity is being threatened (the Wicked Queen in *Snow White*), when she is insulted (*Maleficent* from *Sleeping Beauty*; who, while technically not a queen, fits into the category as Disney depicts her in all the trappings of a regal being who rules her own castle), or simply when it suits her (the Evil Stepmother from *Cinderella*).

**WHAT THIS REVEALS:** The trouble with this trope is the idea that women in power are a threat and need to be taken down or defeated. The above examples shows instances of women not being responsible, worthy, or deserving of the power they have. Their willingness to wield it over trivial matters again and again lead to their inevitable downfall.



***FOR MY 50TH BIRTHDAY I GOT EVERYTHING  
YOU'D EXPECT: A SHAWL, A CANE, A  
BROOMSTICK, AND A TASTE FOR BLOOD.***

---

<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines a trope in this sense as **a common or overused theme or device: a cliché.**

**THE OTHER WOMAN/HOMEWRECKER:** This is a woman who is, for all intents and purposes, simply not the protagonist. Whether she is knowingly insinuating herself into a developed relationship with the intentions of 'stealing away' the object of the protagonist's affections or just happens to not be the person the audience is rooting for, these are characters that become involved in a romantic multiplicity on the wrong end.

**WHAT THIS REVEALS:** Many people have experienced unrequited desire, having someone turn their affections elsewhere, or outright rejection and by no means should the idea be banned from every story. It's real and that's why we connect to it. It becomes problematic however when it is simply used as a cheap device to reinforce the trope itself of the competitive divide<sup>2</sup> (in this case over - most times in media - men) between women. As, with all of these tropes, opposed to giving the character her own agency and complexity.

**THE SEDUCTRESS:** There are many, many types that fall under this category. From the Femme-Fatale (Selina Kyle/Catwoman) to the Whore/Slut (any character who has tried to lure the 'virtuous man or woman' to his moral demise) to the Dragon Lady (O-Ren Ishii from Kill Bill), these are the villainesses who use their sexual prowess and attractive qualities to be the protagonist's undoing.

**WHAT THIS REVEALS:** Many cultures throughout time have always had complex and many times narrow views on sex and sexuality. One pervasive misconception throughout the history of western culture has been the idea that women are not sexual beings nor do/should they truly enjoy sex of their own accord. This has often led to the trope that there must be something 'off' or even villainous about women who do enjoy sex, perhaps even that - to the Seductress - she sees sex merely as a tool to the downfall of others.

**THE MADWOMAN:** This is a woman who, as the name might suggest, is depicted as being unpredictable, insane, and many times prone to violent outbursts. More often used as villainesses in the horror category, she may be someone who has seemingly lost her sanity to religion or a cult (Margaret White in Carrie) or a relationship not panning out how she wants (Alex from Fatal Attraction) or possesses a combination of mental illness coupled with cruelty and trauma (Bellatrix Lestrange of Harry Potter).

**WHAT THIS REVEALS:** Mental illness has historically been misdiagnosed and misunderstood with a particular focus on women. From the very word hysteria originating from the Greek word hystera meaning "uterus" and the accompanying thought that said condition occurred as a result of womb issues, there has been a cultural connection between women and their 'delicate states of mind.' The Madwoman realizes the fear of what happens when a woman lets go and truly becomes insane - a frightening thought when culture historically sees us as being already so close.

---

<sup>2</sup> The trope of the competitive divide pushes the cliched idea that women should be or are constantly competing against and trying to undermine one another.

**THE VILLAINESS IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING:** This is a woman who appears sweet, kind, and/or caring but is actually malicious and underhanded. Whether she is meticulously put together with all of the right details (Dolores Umbridge from Harry Potter) or she appears innocent and naive (Saffron from Firefly), these are women that use deception and appearance to achieve their nefarious goals.

**WHAT THIS REVEALS:** Nothing is ever as it seems. There have been common stereotypes that women are more cunning and deceptive than straightforward. This villainess trope takes that idea to the extreme, depicting women as not only deceptive for their own personal means but actively out to get the protagonist. It inherently brings with it the idea that women cannot truly be trusted.

## **BONUS VILLAINESS TROPES**

Neither of the following are human and/or organic, so they do fall into their own sorts of categories, however they do either present as female or have biologically female elements so they are being included.

**THE AI:** While neither a woman nor a man, many times this villain is depicted with a female voice and/or body. From computers that want to protect us from ourselves (VIKI of I, Robot) to artificial intelligences that just... do what they do (GLaDOS of Portal), these are antagonists who think they know more because, on some levels, they probably do.

**THE MONSTER/CREATURE:** As with the AI, the Monster is not a villainess in the typical sense, but there are some that are markedly female so they are here for mention. These are monsters that haunt the dark spaces and strike fear into audiences' hearts. While many times the gender of the monsters remain unknown, those that are revealed tend to be creatures who are looking for warm places to reproduce (The Alien Queen of Alien).



## *Get Wicked*

Our list encompasses many of the villainess tropes, but there are certainly many more that exist. Now that you've become more familiar with a number of them, it's time to apply that knowledge... to yourself! If you were a villainess, would you fall into any of the above tropes? If so how would you broaden the definition to give it more character complexity and narrative interest? Would you create your own brand new category or even combine some of the above?

Fill out the following villainess sheet to help get you started.

Your nefarious name: \_\_\_\_\_

Your powers: \_\_\_\_\_

What is your favorite kind of chaos? \_\_\_\_\_

What motivates you? \_\_\_\_\_

There is a pesky protagonist bothering you, what are they doing? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Why does it bother you? \_\_\_\_\_

What are three of your top methods of dealing with them?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

Use the space below to draw your villainous portrait:

# *Agents of Change*

Are you ready to take your knowledge and put it into action? We've compiled a list of ways you can be an Agent of Change in fighting back against harmful villainess tropes.

- Host a YouTube watch party to view clips of everyone's favorite villainesses. Discuss the tropes you see and how you might suggest changing the content to improve the narrative.
- Write the creators of the shows, movies, games, and books that have positive or negative representation of villainesses. Share your support with those who challenge tropes and call on those that rely on tropes to do better.
- Support content that includes better depictions of villainesses by attending movies, buying books and games, and watching TV shows.
- Revise your favorite villainess through fanfiction or fan art - how would you depict them differently?
- Gather your friends together and create your own villainess in your favorite medium. If you like comic books, develop a comic book together or if you prefer film, write a script and make your own short video.
- Write a zine expressing your thoughts on villainesses. Zines are great ways to express yourself in multiple ways - poetry, art, essays. It's extra fun to write one with friends! When you're done, make copies and distribute to your network.
- Research some of the tropes we didn't get to cover in this Handbook:
  - The Mean Girl/Frenemy
  - The Stepmother
  - The Evil Genius
  - The Creepy Little Girl
  - The Siren
  - The Crazy Ex
  - The Narcissist/Rich Lady
  - The Nun
  - The School Marm
  - The Spinster
- Role-playing games are a great way to immediately be creative with the villainesses you want to see in the world. If you are GM or player, take your ideal villainess and turn her into a character.



***I'M TOTALL READY TO CHANGE!  
(...A PRINCE INTO A FROG...)***

## *The Takeaway*

There are many ways that characters of all types are pigeon-holed, stereotyped, and put into trope-sized boxes including women, LGBTQ, and underrepresented communities. Even straight, white, cis, male characters can be victims of cliched and tired writing devices that are fueled by the patriarchy. The issue, of course, being that the pool of straight, white, cis, male characters is so much broader that there are many more instances of well thought out, deep, and complex characters than in circumstances where there is much thinner and poorer representation.

Villains tend to represent what society fears or agrees is unacceptable or wrong in some way. Villainesses historically have represented the same but with the added layer of what society fears or agrees is unacceptable or wrong about women and femininity. While the culture of media is changing and making some positive strides, we still have a ways to go and deliberate awareness with a critical eye is the first step. It's okay to enjoy media that may have representational issues (realistically what at this point doesn't in some way or another?). However it's important to keep an open mind and think about what could change or be improved.



## *Thank you!*

Thank you for embarking on this little journey into the world of villainesses with us! We hope that you have enjoyed and found this first edition of the Heroine's Handbook to be helpful and informative.

If you would like to find out more about Super Heroines, Etc., visit us online at [www.superheroinesetc.org](http://www.superheroinesetc.org) or follow us on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/superheroinesetc](http://www.facebook.com/superheroinesetc)). If you would like to contribute to a future edition of the Heroine's Handbook or find out other ways to get involved with what we do, please email [admin@superheroinesetc.org](mailto:admin@superheroinesetc.org) or [fox@superheroinesetc.org](mailto:fox@superheroinesetc.org).