ABSTRACT

PERRY CLARK MESHAW. Some of My Best Friends are Villains: Reading Identity Politics in Evil Fictions. (Under the direction of Professor Nancy Penrose.)

The evil antagonist character known as the “villain” has become ubiquitous. Part of the villain’s composition is found in difference oppositional to the ideals of hegemonic identity politics. A malicious character is created to include identities that are disenfranchised, and this pairing furthers the privileging of identities in power by equating difference with evil. I argue that there is a literacy for understanding how evil characters are used to promote an ideology of “normalcy.” This work is based on a lesson I taught for a first-year writing class, where my students and I examined the intersecting identities of villains and were able to see what identities, thought essential to a character, were additions that promoted the association of the marginalized with evil.

To illustrate the use of marginalized identities in the construction of villainy, I analyze two characters that, while thought to be purely evil, still retain identity politics even in their roles as evil incarnate. To show how this process can be understood, I have selected Lord Voldemort of the Harry Potter series to show how a character written to be a “Dark Lord” also encompasses able-ist ideologies of mind and body. I have selected Ursula, the Sea Witch of Disney’s The Little Mermaid, because the character’s differences are so prolific. Additionally, I have highlighted a practice of adapting the animated Ursula which reveals a Disney-sanctioned point of view where the sea witch’s essence in live-action formats is interpreted through a lens of racial misogyny. To conclude, I provide suggestions on a pedagogy formed around a literacy of the political elements of the villain.