

The Nemesis as the Protagonist's 'Shadow'

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Want drama? Ask your Protagonist: What do you fear the most? Then put them in a story where they have to confront that fear: Their Nemesis.

A few years ago, I gave a series of presentations at the Austin Film Festival, the London Screenwriters' Festival, and the Willamette Writers Conference. One subject I explored at all the events was this: [How to write a worthy Nemesis](#).

It's a critical concern because apart from your Protagonist, the Nemesis is almost assuredly the most important character in your story. Indeed, Hollywood has a special affinity for Nemesis characters.

First off, some of the most memorable figures in movie history have been Nemeses: From Darth Vader [*Star Wars: Episode IV — A New Hope*] and the Wicked Witch of the West [*The Wizard of Oz*], to Nurse Ratched [*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*] and Mr. Potter [*It's a Wonderful Life*], to the Alien [*Alien*] and the Shark [*Jaws*], Nemesis characters cast a long shadow within the stories they inhabit and outside in the imaginations of movie viewers.

Second, actors love to play Bad Guys and Gals. It's

interesting, even fun to explore the dark side of a character's psyche, allowing the actor to dredge up and use powerful negative energy. When a script pings into a studio exec or producer's email inbox that has a well-crafted, multidimensional, and captivating Nemesis, ones such as Gordon Gekko [*Wall Street*], the Joker [*The Dark Knight Rises*], and Hans Gruber [*Die Hard*], that is a plus because Hollywood players know those roles will appeal to name talent.

Third, a particularly noteworthy Nemesis can result in a movie franchise: Consider Jason [*Friday the 13th*] and Freddie Krueger [*Nightmare on Elm Street*], or Dr. Evil [*Austin Powers*] and Dracula. Hollywood studios froth at the mouth for so-called 'tentpole movies'. If your script has a mesmerizing Nemesis to which the studio feels audiences will respond over the course of multiple movies, that is another big plus.

It didn't surprise me the response to my Nemesis presentations in London, Austin, and Portland were so well received. Writers know how important a Nemesis character is. How to write one. That's another thing entirely.

Here are some excerpts from the introduction to my 75 minute presentation which provides one interesting key to writing a worthy Nemesis.

If the Protagonist is the single most important character in your story, the Nemesis is not far behind. A Protagonist

almost always has a *conscious goal*, what we may call Want, and an *unconscious goal*, what we may call Need, but there is no conflict, no drama, indeed no story unless someone or something actively strives to block the Protagonist from achieving their goals.

Enter the Nemesis. This character not only functions as a Protagonist's foe, the Nemesis is capable of generating within the reader tension, anxiety, disgust, even fear. While we may try to avoid these feelings in our daily lives, we are lured to them in our stories, a safe place in which to experience the 'darker' side of existence. Plus the simple fact is most of us find this type of stuff damned entertaining.

At the very least, a writer must aim to craft a *worthy* Nemesis. What precisely does that mean? Here are three important qualities:

- *Powerful Opposition*: More than just obstructing the Protagonist's path toward their goal, a Nemesis should create an active, crafty, and formidable resistance.
- *Significant Opposition*: The resistance a Nemesis provides should not be a general one, but rather something tied to the Protagonist's specific psyche and journey.
- *Entertaining Opposition*: The efforts and actions of a Nemesis should not only be powerful and significant, they should also be interesting and compelling.

Consider some of the Nemesis characters noted above:

- Darth Vader: He has the power of the Empire, knowledge of the Dark Side of the Force, and the skills of a Jedi warrior. As the Protagonist [Luke Skywalker] enters the story, he has none of these assets.
- The Wicked Witch of the West: She has vast knowledge of Oz, a fortress castle, magical powers, the willingness to kill to achieve her aims, and an armada of flying monkeys and armed guards. The Protagonist [Dorothy Gale] is a Fish-Out-Of-Water, and has nothing more than ruby red slippers and her dog Toto.
- Nurse Ratched: She has a phalanx of nurses and hospital attendants, daily doses of medication to dull her patients' senses, and an authoritarian presence that chills the bones of everyone around her. When the Protagonist [R.P. McMurphy] arrives at the facility, he has nothing but a wicked sense of humor and a defiant attitude.
- Mr. Potter: He has enormous wealth, vast real estate holdings, and instilled the fear of God in every living soul in Bedford Falls. The Protagonist [George Bailey] loses his father as well as his opportunity to go to college and travel, then gets stuck running the family business, a job he actively loathes.
- Alien: It grows at an exponential rate, has superhuman strength, an acid-based bodily fluid that eats through metal, a keen intelligence, and a voracious appetite for

mayhem and murder. The Protagonist [Ellen Ripley] is the low 'man' on the totem pole of decision-makers, reflective of her initial powerless state.



Mr. Potter in 'It's a Wonderful Life'

And so the question: **How do we write a worthy Nemesis?**

The key to the approach I will lay out is this: Begin with the Protagonist. Everything in a story flows from the choice of your Protagonist including the nature and being of the Nemesis. We start by considering the concept of the Protagonist's *shadow* and the Protagonist's pull toward the Light.

Shadow vs. Light

Let me present to you what may be a startling concept, one that suggests a Nemesis is intimately connected to the Protagonist's psyche. Indeed one way of looking at the Nemesis is as a physicalization of the Protagonist's shadow, a projection come to life.

Parsing that language, the *psyche* represents the totality of the human persona, conscious and unconscious states, thoughts and feelings. *Projection* occurs when an individual ascribes aspects of their psyche onto someone else. Finally the *shadow* is one key facet of the psyche, an idea promulgated by the noted analytical psychologist Carl Jung:

*Unfortunately there can be no doubt that man is, on the whole, less good than he imagines himself or wants to be. **Everyone carries a shadow**, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is. If an inferiority is conscious, one always has a chance to correct it. Furthermore, it is constantly in contact with other interests, so that it is continually subjected to modifications. **But if it is repressed and isolated from consciousness, it never gets corrected.** — "Psychology and Religion" (1938).*

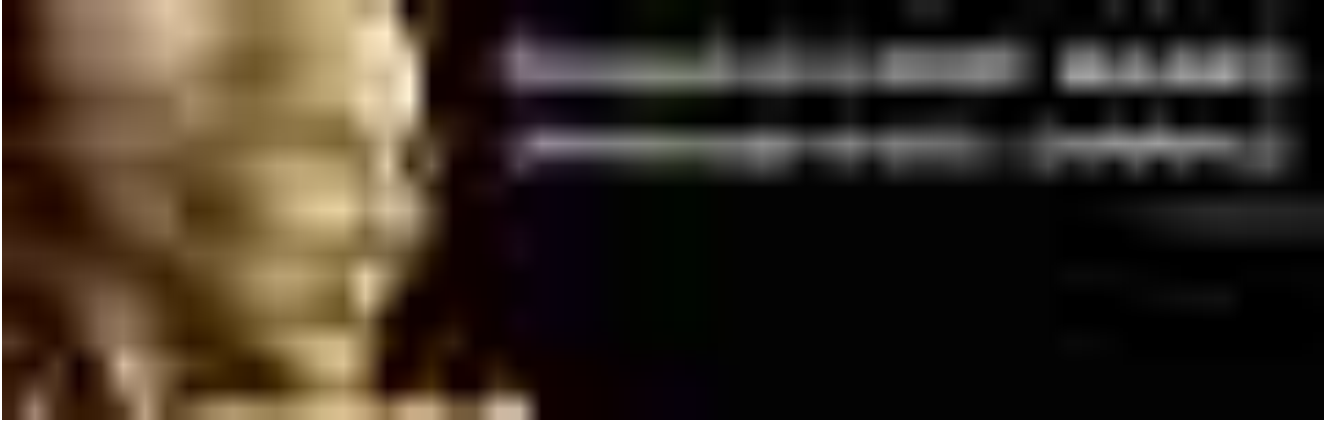
The shadow is all aspects of an individual's psyche that exist outside the light of consciousness. While there can be positive energy associated with it, more often than not the shadow expresses itself as a negative dynamic, deriving

from the least desirable facets of a person's psyche:

*It is a frightening thought that man also has a **shadow side** to him, consisting not just of little weaknesses and foibles, but of a **positively demonic dynamism**. The individual seldom knows anything of this; to him, as an individual, it is incredible that he should ever in any circumstances go beyond himself. But let these harmless creatures form a mass, and there **emerges a raging monster**; and each individual is only one tiny cell in the monster's body, so that for better or worse he must accompany it on its **bloody rampages** and even assist it to the utmost. — "On the Psychology of the Unconscious" (1912).*

Positively demonic dynamism... emerges a raging monster... bloody rampages. If we project these attributes into the realm of story, doesn't it sound like a Nemesis at work? Furthermore the presence of a character's shadow suggests a direction for the narrative:

*The hero's main feat is to **overcome the monster of darkness**: it is the long-hoped-for and expected triumph of consciousness over the unconscious. The coming of consciousness was probably the most tremendous experience of primeval times, for with it a world came into being whose existence no one had suspected before. "And God said, **'Let there be light'**" is the projection of that immemorial experience of the separation of consciousness from the unconscious. —*



In a story's Internal World, the psychological and emotional realm, the Hero's Journey is about engaging the Shadow, bringing it into the light of consciousness, then subduing it.

In a story's External World, the realm of action and events, this dynamic almost always plays itself out as a confrontation between Protagonist and Nemesis, the latter a physicalization of the Protagonist's darkest, most repressed desires and feelings.

This means that to the degree the Nemesis reflects key attributes of the Protagonist's shadow, a story will have a natural sense of unity and an organic synergy between these two critical characters: Shadow vs. Light.

Let's look at some movie examples:

- In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Clarice Starling [Protagonist] must contend with her shadow, wrapped up in the murder of her father, by bringing to light her nightmares associated with the slaughter of the lambs on her uncle's farm, then confront Buffalo Bill

[Nemesis], a projection of her fears, and slay him.

- In *Gladiator*, Maximus [Protagonist] has to overcome his shadow, the death of his wife and son, by becoming a successful gladiator in order to confront Commodus [Nemesis], the Emperor who ordered the murder of Maximus' family.
- In *Unforgiven*, Will Munny [Protagonist] has to face his shadow, a past life as a gunslinger and killer, when he takes on a series of Nemesis characters, embracing one last time the violent part of his psyche he had tried to repress.



Commodus in 'Gladiator'

In the language of Joseph Campbell, "The ultimate dragon is within you." In a story, that dragon can take the shape of the Nemesis, allowing the Protagonist to slay it, thereby coming to grips with their own shadow, and moving toward the light of consciousness.

These examples above all involve violence and the actual death of Nemesis characters, but the Protagonist-Nemesis dynamic works on a metaphorical level as well:

- In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy [Protagonist] confronts her shadow, her orphaned self which does not feel at home in Kansas, by intersecting with the Wicked Witch of the West [Nemesis], the physicalization of the bitter, lonely soul Dorothy could grow up to become if she doesn't embrace her adoptive family.
- In *The Apartment*, C.C. Baxter [Protagonist] deals with his shadow, a rabid desire for climbing up the corporate ladder, by coming up against Sheldrake [Nemesis] who represents how a man can gain a kingdom, but lose his soul.
- In *Tootsie*, Michael Dorsey [Protagonist / Dustin Hoffman] meets his shadow in the form of Ron [Nemesis / Dabney Coleman], a sexist TV director, contributing to Michael's education along with the wisdom provided by adopting the persona of Dorothy Michaels [Mentor].



The point here is this language is scalable relative to the type and genre of any story, whether it involves the Protagonist's physical or symbolic engagement with a Nemesis.

Takeaway: One key to writing a worthy Nemesis is to begin with the Protagonist and specifically the Protagonist's "shadow."