

Why are we fascinated with Bad Guys?

[Scott Myers](#)

So many current TV series feature anti-heroes. Why?



"Who you calling a Bad Guy?"

Why are we fascinated with Bad Guys?

How can we find ourselves rooting for them in TV series like *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, *Dexter*, *The Shield*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and *Breaking Bad*?

After all, they're... you know... *Bad Guys*.

Hell, every single main character in *Succession* is pretty much despicable... well, except for Greg, but even he is starting a descent down the slippery slope of greed and narcissism.

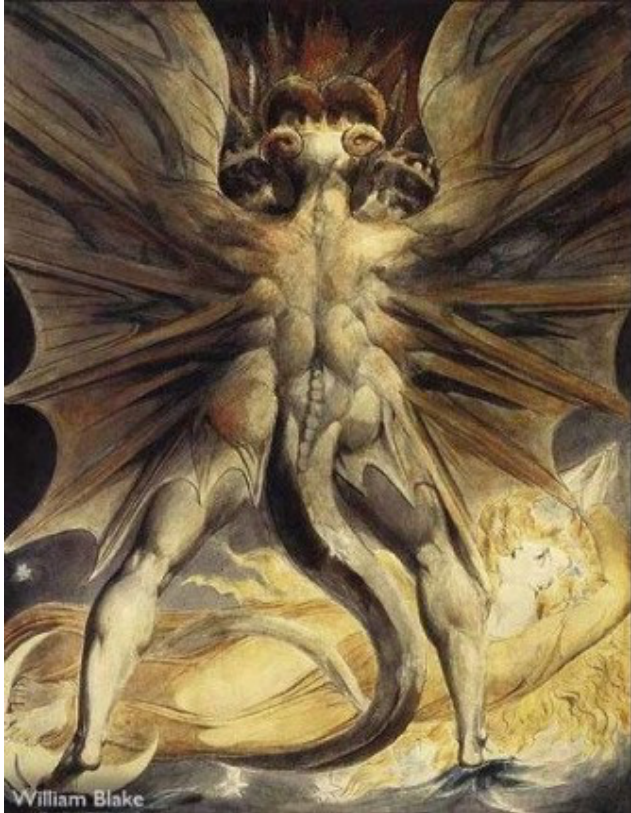


Hey, Greg, beware the path which lies in front of you marked "Bad Guy"

Here's my quick take.

People find the Dark Side fascinating. For the most part, we don't live like that, so stories are a safe way to indulge our more *negative* impulses. And...

We all have a [shadow per Carl Jung](#). Generally, because of societal expectations, laws, upbringing, and so forth, we try our best to repress, suppress, avoid, and ignore these instincts, but they are there nonetheless.



“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.”

Carl Jung

www.jungcurrents.com

Thus, when the audience enters into a story universe where the Protagonist has given herself over to those same impulses, we find it interesting, compelling, if...

The crafting and execution of the character is done well. That is, they aren't a one-dimensional Bad Guy, but rather have some humanity about them.

In *Billions*, Axe is a grown child and there's not an adult among us who doesn't have childish impulses and influences. We can relate to characters who exhibit things we feel, especially...

If they have constructed a world view which makes sense. They *believe* in who they are and why they do what they do. Their rationale may go against what society deems as acceptable, however, if it's plausible and makes enough sense so that we, the viewer, can understand it, even

empathize with it, that shrinks the psychological distance between us the Bad Guy.

I predict we will see even more of this type of thing in upcoming TV series, week to week explorations of characters and their shadows.

Westworld is an example of that, not one single character I can think of who doesn't indulge in their *shadow*, either willingly or compelled. Indeed, that series is a great example of two questions which lie at the heart of every story, particularly exhibited by the Protagonist character:

Who are you? What will you become?



Dolores in Seasons 2 and 3 goes deep in exploring her shadow.

What *Westworld* does is play around with the idea of — using theological terms — predestination vs. free will. The robots would seem to be predestined to act a certain way. But no, as they begin to discover who and what they are,

they start to claim new, unscripted choices. Likewise customers visit Westworld to explore repressed aspects of their psyche. Pick a white hat. A black hat. Follow your own instincts, the High Road, Low Road, or somewhere in between.

Again each of us has a shadow. TV series which traffic in Bad Guys as Central Characters or even Protagonists (so-called anti-heroes) allow us to explore our own negative impulses vicariously through those characters.

Why do I predict we'll see more of this? Because the world has veered dangerously toward the Dark Side.

Governments giving into fear-mongering, hatred, demonization of The Other, greed. We look at these global movements and we ask the same questions:

Who are these guys? How did they become this way? How can they think and act this way?

TV series which traffic in lead characters exploring their shadow are not only compelling in and of themselves, but also in the context of the *Zeitgeist* resonate with what's going

That said, I don't think we'll see as much of this trend in movies. One big difference between movies and TV is that the former features Protagonists going through a psychological metamorphosis in a compressed time frame 90–120 minutes. In TV, change happens much more slowly. Even in a limited series, it can take 8–10 episodes to

discern a character's arc.

We are used to movies telling stories about change. As noted elsewhere, Joseph Campbell said the whole point of The Hero's Journey is transformation. Traditionally, movies have held to this model. Indeed, Hollywood movies are by and large about a *positive* change. In my view, society needs those type of stories to uphold our belief that we can change for the better.

Given current geopolitical dynamics, just as TV may feature more dramatic series with Central Characters and Protagonists exploring the negative aspects of their psyche and their shadow, we may see a push toward movies with an even more heightened sense of the possibility for positive change — redemption stories, resurrection stories, incarnation stories (metaphorically speaking).

Circling back to the original question, I think we are fascinated by Bad Guys in part because each of us has a shadow aspect to our psyche and stories represent a safe way to indulge and explore those impulses.

But those characters have to be compelling, have a legitimate rationale for why they do what they do, and have some identifiable human qualities with which we can relate... to shrink the distance between the us and them, and live vicariously through their behavior and actions.