

The Depiction of Evil Characters in British Literature

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INTRODUCTION

When peers ask, “What is the theme of your curriculum unit?” and I tell them “Evil, basically,” their first reaction is usually “Oh how interesting!” but I know that deep down inside they are probably thinking that I am strange, morose, and perhaps evil myself. They may even question whether or not this topic is appropriate to teach to students. There are of course those who genuinely find this theme interesting but hesitate when it comes to the idea of focusing a unit around this theme. Most adults have one of these reactions because they have already formulated their own morals and values and ultimately their own definitions and opinions of evil and what it means. Here lies the value of this unit on a high school level. The intentions are not to teach right from wrong, since this hopefully has been done by the twelfth grade, but rather to examine, through characters in British literature, reasons and motivations behind the concept of evil. One type of recurring theme in British literature is the idea that evil characters are directly related to experiences of tragedy, pain, confusion, and sadness. Students begin to contemplate the motivation behind the evil deeds of Grendel and his mother in *Beowulf*. Students begin to start wondering, especially after reading *Macbeth*, why is it the guy who is plagued with evil thoughts and deeds always ends up the loser? Why is the monster in *Frankenstein* considered evil? After reading through excerpts of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* students ask, “Don’t we ever read about goodness and purity without evil?” It is usually then that I go through the lecture on how there can be no good without evil; the yin and the yang story; the for every positive there is a negative story, and finally end up by saying “Cinderella was covered in fifth grade.”

The one interest that remains consistent for students and is in all the literature to be covered in this specific unit is the study of evil and its importance in the development of character in British literature. Students at the twelfth grade level are faced with many challenges in today’s society. Teaching literary concepts may prepare them for college courses but learning about characters and, more specifically, evil concepts in characters will prepare them for life.

The students will comprehend that the motivations for characters to commit evil acts are essentially the same as today’s reason for committing evil acts. Human emotions whether the frailties or strengths were the same in the eighth century as they are today. The only real difference is the circumstances have changed. Instead of the evil dragon, we now have drugs, gangs, or policemen to take the place of once a supernatural evil.

This unit provides the students with interesting characters in British literature to study, contemporary films to view and on which to comment, and creative means to express their own interpretations of evil.

OBJECTIVES

In this unit students will compose their own concepts of evil, evaluate characters within the literature that are described as evil, study several different philosophies of evil, and view, in contemporary film, characters that have been universally identified as evil. The overall goal for the students is to teach them to think independently. Individual students will determine for themselves how they developed their own definition of evil.

When students begin this unit they will be asked to look within themselves to find the answers to their own questions. Students will start contemplating what the term “evil” means. They may be shocked to find that there are many different views of this term. There will be students who agree that natural disasters are considered evil and some students will agree that money is evil. What evil is to one person in the class may not be evil to another. This unit will fuse prior knowledge and new information into a solid background from which they can better evaluate their own definitions of evil rather than believing what someone else has told them to believe. While they are pondering what evil is and how it affects their own lives, they will begin to compose working definitions. At the end of this unit, students will go back to their original definition and evaluate it, making changes if necessary.

The emphasis of this curriculum unit is on analyzing the evil characteristics of specific characters within the literature. The students will analyze complex characters such as Grendel, Macbeth, the Pardoner, Lady Macbeth, Satan, and Dr. Frankenstein. While reading the literature, the students will become familiar with literary terms that are necessary for full comprehension of the literature. For example, in *Beowulf*, the term “kenning” will be discussed in detail. Other literary elements that will be focused on include theme, atmosphere, setting, mood, tone, aphorism, exemplum, allusion, metaphor, and imagery. All of these elements give the students a better understanding of the character and how he or she is depicted as evil.

Another objective is for students to practice research procedures. In this unit the Modern Language Association (MLA) format is recommended. The students will be responsible for researching several different philosophies of evil. The students will research specific philosopher’s ideas on evil to better understand the concept. Theories from Alford, Pagels, Freud, Nietzsche, and Hobbes will be researched in small groups. This serves two major purposes in the unit. One, it provides the students an opportunity to research major theories that can add to the comprehension of evil in literature and film, and two, it re-enforces the importance and necessity of the basic understanding of doing research. Many students, whether they are college-bound or planning other goals in their

life, dread the infamous “research paper.” If the students have an interest and enthusiasm in a topic that has been deeply rooted in prior knowledge, then the research paper no longer is a dreaded barrier to graduation but rather an important tool with which they can gain information.

Coupled with the classic literature they will be viewing contemporary films with similar themes. This helps to visualize the concepts that the students may consider “ancient” as contemporary issues on which they may be better equipped to comment and feel more comfortable in evaluating. While the students view these films, they will search for similarities and differences between literary and film characters. Subconsciously the students are analyzing the characters in the literature read by evaluating and judging the characters on film, thereby thinking on a higher-level.

Once the students realize that the motivations for a character committing evil in the fifth, fourteenth, or eighteenth century are basically the same as today, then the literature and all the complexities associated with British literature will not seem so ancient or complex. Although the idea of evil may not be something that is construed as a positive endeavor, it most certainly can be used to tie together two important academic goals; analyzing classic literature and higher-level thinking.

STRATEGIES

There are three basic strategies used to achieve the objectives mentioned above. First, the use of cooperative learning groups for the purposes of sharing information and enthusiasm. The topic of evil is one that all students will have something to comment about, usually in somewhat of a loud discussion. This learning strategy is extremely important because it allows the students to develop their own opinions. The use of small cooperative learning groups will enable the students to voice their beliefs and opinions to their peers and give them an opportunity to comment on one another’s views without teacher interruption or bias. The small groups work well especially for those students who are timid in voicing their experiences or opinions to a larger audience.

Another strategy that will be used in this unit is that of creative expression through writing and art. Allowing the students time and an opportunity to communicate their own ideas of evil within their preferred medium will bring them closer to evaluation of their own beliefs. The students who are frustrated with communication through writing will be able to communicate through art, music, or poetry.

One assignment that has proven successful in the past is allowing the students to interpret the concept of evil visually in their own artwork. For example, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton gives descriptions of hell that the students can visualize through use of imagery. The student who has talent in the visual arts can relate his/her interpretation of what Milton is communicating through literature. Although there was a time when I asked the

students to interpret visually their idea of hell and one student drew himself sitting in my class.

The students will also log in daily reading journals both themes that occur in the literature as well as any ideas on evil based on the characters. This particular assignment gives the students a valuable tool for evaluation. This is an outlet where the students can grapple with their ideas of evil. They will be shaping their own values and morals into statements that they can defend. In these journals they will be honest with their opinions, beliefs, questions, observations, and will be encouraged to be creative with their feelings.

Quite frequently the students will feel more comfortable writing personal journals on how they relate to the characters when they know that the journals are private. Many students use this opportunity to create wonderful poetry.

At the end of this unit the students will have been through a journey of discovery, learning of themselves and hopefully the world. The students can go back and read their journals and see before their own eyes the thought processes that occurred as well as the changes and learning that was achieved. Moreover, as the students mature, they will remember ideas learned and gathered from this experience and apply what they can to their lives.

The final strategy used in this unit will be essay writing, or literary critical analysis. This strategy is most important for the development of higher level thinking skills. There are several essays that will be composed by the students that will enrich their use of MLA documentation and help to further their understanding of evil concepts through critical analysis of the literary works. It is important that the essays based on the literature be done independently as the students must learn to rely on themselves and the literature for independent evaluation. It is through these essays that the students will become sure of themselves in their judgements, evaluations, and interpretations of what they have read. For example, one specific essay will evaluate the evil depiction of Grendel through the use of kennings, setting, atmosphere, and methods of characterization. The students will have to prove using quotes from the text their means of evaluation. Students should become comfortable with expressing an opinion about the literature and should have the tools necessary to back their opinion.

Weaving these strategies together to achieve the objectives will leave the students and the teacher with a tremendous sense of accomplishment both personally and academically.

ACTIVITIES

This curriculum unit is to be taught throughout the first semester of British literature. The films and the journal should coincide with the literature read. The research part of the unit may be completed at the teacher's discretion. A majority of this unit will be done in small

groups. Groups of three or four, depending on class size, should be determined prior to any assignment. The completion of essays on various topics should be done independently. The assessment of written, group, oral and creative assignments is also at the teacher's discretion.

The teacher's role in this unit is merely to guide the students to the information and topics. Many of the assignments are student-centered and require specific roles. It is recommended that students doing group work be given roles such as: recorder, student that writes down the information; reporter, student that orally presents the information; task-master, student that keeps other group members on task, and leader, student that makes sure everyone in the group participates in the discussion.

The teacher will focus discussions and questions on the literary and philosophical text. For the literature, many teachers have different styles and approaches to teaching the text; therefore any added literary devices will be at the teacher's discretion. Quotes of the theories to be researched in this unit are included in Appendix 1. Synopses of the films to be viewed are included in Appendix 2. The films included in the unit are rated PG (parental guidance) and R (restricted) and may require administration approval prior to viewing.

The group research paper recommended in this unit will be written in the standard MLA format. It is recommended that four students be assigned to a group. This is dependent on class size and again is at the teacher's discretion.

The daily reading journal should be completed independently, and it is recommended that assessment be based on quality rather than quantity. Often students ask, "How many pages does this assignment have to be?" For this particular assignment, students should be asked to write every day with no length requirement. This assessment is also at the teacher's discretion. It is, however, recommended that this daily journal be taken as a grade at the end of the semester. This is recommended so that the student does not have to part with the journal until the end of the unit. This allows the student privacy to his/her thoughts and prevents the student from writing "anything" in the journal for a daily grade.

Activity One

This activity should begin prior to any reading of the required literature. Students will work independently answering the following questions from *What Evil Means to Us* by C. Fred Alford. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997. 161-2.

1. Does evil exist? How do you know?
2. What's our definition of evil?
3. Why do you think there is evil in the world? Has there always been? Will there always be? Where does it come from?

4. Have you experienced evil in your own life? How? Tell me in as much detail as you can.
5. Are some people evil?
6. Is it evil to follow orders that hurt innocents?
7. Is evil always big, like rape, murder, and assault? Can there be “little evils,” like a cutting remark: Or is all evil the same?
8. Is it evil to think evil?

Students will form groups of four and discuss the answers to questions number two and number five. Each member of the group will participate verbally. As a group, students will answer on one piece of paper the following questions:

1. Who do you consider an evil person in history, film, music, and literature?
2. Why do you consider these people evil?

Students will then be asked to write, on their own paper, their definition of evil. Students, within their groups, will share each of their definitions. The group will then compose a group definition of evil based on the individual definitions and then report their group’s definition to the class as a whole. Out of the four or five definitions, depending on class size, one class definition of evil will be composed. This definition will be evaluated and perhaps changed as the unit evolves.

Activity Two

Individual students will be asked to bring in films, music, literature, artifacts, music videos, and art with a depiction of an evil concept or character. Each student will present his/her ideas to the class on the piece they bring. The teacher will lead the discussion and ask questions on the validity of each piece. Each student will answer questions that the teacher asks or other students ask about the piece they bring. This activity illustrates the many different interpretations of evil.

Activity Three

Students should be divided into five groups of four for the research paper. Each group will be assigned a specific philosopher to study. Students will go to the library and research the philosopher’s theory of evil. Students will compose a research paper on information they have found. The following are the groups and philosophers:

Group 1- Freud

Group 4- Nietzsche

Group 2- Rousseau

Group 5- Pagels

Group 3- Hobbes

Resources should be reserved in library prior to this assignment.

Groups will present research papers to the class.

See resource list for details on necessary books.

The time frame to complete this activity and length requirement is at the teacher's discretion.

Activity Four

After each group has presented their research papers to the class, students should have group discussion on the theories. The teacher will then discuss briefly each theory.

The teacher will discuss the specific information from the quotes on Appendix 1 for each of the philosophies. The students will be asked to interpret the quotes based on their research. For example, the teacher will write on the board the brief quote from a particular theory. The students will then be asked to interpret or paraphrase the information into their own words. See Appendix 1.

Activity Five

The class will read *Beowulf*, from text, translated by Burton Raffel. Students will begin daily journal entries where they will document for the entire unit all ideas about evil that they have read. The time to finish this assignment is at the teacher's discretion. Other literary elements will be examined at this time.

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|--------------|------------------|-------------|
| a. kenning | d. allusion | f. imagery |
| b. theme | e. methods of | g. metaphor |
| c. symbolism | characterization | |

In a group students will discuss the evil characteristics displayed by the characters Grendel and his mother. Individually students will compose an essay that evaluates the theme of "good vs. evil" by comparing Beowulf to Grendel and his mother. Students should focus on the characters' motivations, actions, and consequences.

Activity Six

The teacher will lead discussion on the theme of "good vs. evil." The students will then view the film *Fifth Element*. Journal entries should continue to be composed on the films as well. The film will be used to illustrate the same theme. The students should comment in their journals each character's motivations, actions, and consequences. Students will compose short essay (1-2 pages) describing the different images used to represent evil in the film (dark planet, creatures, and ominous presence). Any prior knowledge on other films students have seen that contain images of evil may also be used in this essay. Students may also write a compare-contrast essay on the evil characters in *Beowulf* and in the film. A brief review of this film is included in Appendix 2. Students enjoy this particular movie because it is very visual.

Activity Seven

The use of music to suggest an evil or good presence in films may also be examined at this time in a brief class discussion. The students should bring music to class that has no lyrics. The class will listen to each sample and write in their journals what type of presence the music suggests, good or evil. The teacher will lead a class discussion on why students think music is such a powerful method for achieving a particular presence.

Activity Eight

The students will read *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare. Students will continue to compose daily journal entries. The students should be focusing on the evil characteristics that the characters display. Other literary elements may be taught at this time. The teacher should lead discussion on character's motivations, actions, and consequences.

Activity Nine

The students will construct a talk show format based on the events in *Macbeth*. This activity will require a video recorder. Students will be assigned to portray main characters: Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Banquo, Three Witches, Duncan, and Macduff.

Each main character will compose a one-page biography as an introduction to the talk show. This assignment is student-centered and requires the teacher only to explain the procedures and responsibilities. Student assessment is at the teacher's discretion.

The students will assume the roles of their characters in the play. One student will be the host, one student will be in charge of the camera, and one student will be the director. The remainder of the class will participate as active audience members. Each audience member will be responsible for asking one question to any of the characters. The characters will respond to the questions and defend their "evil" actions. The audience will judge whether each character will be redeemed and permitted into "heaven."

After videotaping the talk show, each student will choose one character and compose a persuasive essay defending against their accusations of committing evil.

Activity Ten

The students will read selections from *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley. Students should continue to make journal entries. The teacher should choose selections that focus on the doctor's struggle with himself and the monster. The students will choose between two persuasive essay topics:

1. Persuade the public that the actions of Victor Frankenstein are evil.
2. Persuade the public that the monster he created is not an evil being.

The goal of this assignment is to have the students discuss ideas of evil from different viewpoints. The teacher will lead a class room discussion on the various ways that society views evil, primarily on the scientific level. Teacher will ask lead questions such as:

1. Can the use of medicine and science lend itself to an evil cause?
2. Can you think of any medical experiments that you would consider evil?
3. Does committing an evil action on some people for the benefit of all justify the action?

Activity Eleven

The students will view the 1994 film *Frankenstein*, directed by Kenneth Branagh. Students will continue to write in their journals. Students will re-evaluate their persuasive essays from Activity Ten and make any changes if necessary. The film should be used to illustrate the differences between the ways that evil is portrayed in literature and film. Teacher should lead class discussion on whether or not viewpoints changed after watching the film. A brief essay can be assigned detailing the similarities and differences between film and literature.

Activity Twelve

The students will view the 1997 film *Mimic*, directed by Guillermo Del Toro. Students will make comments in their journals about the attitudes towards the doctor characters in the movie. Are these people of medicine considered evil? Why or why not? The students will compose an essay comparing or contrasting the portrayal of the doctors in this film and *Frankenstein*.

Activity Thirteen

The students will read excerpts from Book I of *Paradise Lost*, by John Milton. Teacher will lead discussion on heroic ideals and will discuss whether or not the character of Satan has these characteristics. The students will compose an essay discussing Milton's portrayal of Satan as a hero. The students should answer the following questions in the essay: Do we have pity for this character? Why or why not? Are there any positive images or characteristics that we find appealing from Satan's character?

Activity Fourteen

The students will view the 1986 film, *Legend*, directed by Ridley Scott. The students will enter in their journal any comments or notes on the similarities between the Satan character in this movie to Milton's Satan character. The teacher will lead a discussion on various methods used in cinema that create evil characters as appealing. Are the methods similar to the ones Milton used in the literature? The students will write an essay discussing this in further detail.

Activity Fifteen

The students will review their earlier definitions of evil and re-evaluate. They will make any changes if necessary. The students will share their ideas with class as a group discussion. The teacher will lead a final discussion of this unit by commenting briefly on each of the main characters in the literature and how they were depicted as evil. The teacher should have the students make a final comment in their journals about what they liked, didn't like, or found interesting in the unit. Allow the students to make suggestions. This will help the students to remember the importance of what they accomplished in the semester. The final assignment will be for the students to turn in daily journals.

Appendix 1

Quotes from Theories

C. Fred Alford's Theory of evil

What Evil Means to Us (1997)

“Evil is the experience of dread. Doing evil is an attempt to evacuate this experience by inflicting it on others, making them feel dreadful by hurting them. Doing evil is an attempt to transform the terrible passivity and helplessness of suffering into activity” (3). Doing evil is a prevention of losing one-self (9). “In doing evil, the evildoer seeks vitalizing contact with the autistic-contiguous dimension of experience while avoiding its price, an awareness of human pain, vulnerability, and death. In a word evil is cheating” (10).

Elaine Pagels' view on Satan

The Origin of Satan (1995)

“All of the New Testament gospels, with considerable variation, depict Jesus' execution as the culmination of the struggle between good and evil—between God and Satan—that began at his baptism” (12). Satan is a necessity, without him there is no conflict. “Satan, although he seldom appears onstage in these gospel accounts, nevertheless plays a central role in the divine drama, for the gospel writers realize that the story they have to tell would make little sense *without* Satan” (12). “The figure of Satan becomes, among other things, a way of characterizing one's actual enemies as the embodiment of transcendent forces” (13). “...consider Satan as a reflection of how we perceive ourselves and those we call 'others.' Satan has, after all, made a kind of profession out of being the 'other'; and so Satan defines negatively what we think of as human” (xviii).

Sigmund Freud

Civilization and Its Discontent (1930) Chapter II

Life is “too hard for us”; there are three ways to deal with it:

1. powerful deflections
2. substitutive satisfactions
3. intoxicating substances

The struggle in human life is trying to achieve happiness. We are confronted with much suffering.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The Social Contract, from *The Essential Rousseau* (1975)

“Man is born free, and is everywhere in chains” (8). “ This common freedom results from the nature of man. His first law is to look after his own preservation, his first concerns are those that he owes to himself. As soon as he reaches the age of reason, he is the sole judge of the proper means of preserving himself, and he thereby becomes his own master” (9).

Thomas Hobbes

Leviathan (1651) from *Body, Man, and Citizen* (1962)

Life is “nasty, brutish, and short.” “Every man, for his own part, calleth that which pleaseath, and is delightful to himself, GOOD; and that EVIL which displeaseth him” (9).

Human Nature: Or The Fundamental Elements of Policy (1650)

“Signs of honor. The signs of honor are those by which we perceive that one man acknowledgeth the power and worth of another” (213).

“Anger. Anger or sudden courage is nothing but the appetite or desire of overcoming present opposition...Courage. Courage, in a large signification, is the absence of fear in the presence of any evil whatsoever: but in a strict and more common meaning, it is contempt of wounds and death, when they oppose a man in the way to his end” (216).

Friedrich Nietzsche

Beyond Good and Evil (1886)

“Human beings whose nature was still natural, barbarians in every terrible sense of the word, men of prey who were still in possession of unbroken strength of will and lust for power, hurled themselves upon weaker, more civilized, more peaceful races, perhaps traders or cattle raisers, or upon mellow old cultures whose last vitality was even then flaring up in splendid fireworks of spirit and corruption.

In the beginning, the noble caste was always the barbarian caste: their predominance did not lie mainly in physical strength but in strength of the soul- they were more whole human beings (which also means, at every level,) ‘more whole beasts’” (202).

Appendix 2

Synopsis of films

The Fifth Element (Luc Besson, SONY Pictures, 1997, rated PG-13)

In the twenty-third century, a mysterious young woman carries inside her the secret to saving all life on Earth against a sinister enemy, and the key to her survival is in a reluctant hero. This is a story of “good vs. evil.” The good is carried within the “Fifth Element” and it is the only way to destroy evil.

Legend (Ridley Scott, 1986, rated PG)

When the Lord of Darkness captures a unicorn, winter threatens to envelop the world forever. The only hope is that a forest prince and a motley band of dwarves, elves and fairies can rescue the unicorn, defeat the agents of Darkness and restore sunshine to the world.

Mimic (Guillermo Del Toro, DIMENSION, 1997, rated R)

When a cockroach-spread plague threatens to decimate the child population of New York City, evolutionary biologist Susan Tyler and her research associates rig up a species of “Judas” bugs and introduce them into the environment, where they will “mimic” the diseased roaches and destroy their habitats.

Frankenstein (Kenneth Branagh, TRI-STAR, 1995, rated R)

Based on Shelley’s book, this movie has violent scenes and may need administrative approval before viewing. Dr. Frankenstein becomes madly involved in a scientific endeavor to create man from a laboratory. The creation escapes and attempts to destroy the doctor’s life and kills him in the process.

Teachers' Annotated Bibliography

Alford, C. Fred. *What Evil Means to Us*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997.
Alford conducts interviews with several convicts and states that people commit evil in order to deal with a sense of dread that they feel.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Body, Man, and Citizen*. New York, NY: Collier-Macmillan Ltd, 1962.
A collection of works by Thomas Hobbes. Including: *Logic and Methodology Body and Motion, Sense, Animal Motion, and Human Behavior, and Citizens and the Law*.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1966.
Nietzsche sums up, in nine parts, his personal philosophy.

Pagels, Elaine. *The Origin of Satan*. New York, NY: Random House, 1995.
Satan's necessary role in the social history of man is examined.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Essential Rousseau*. Trans. Lowell Blair. New York, NY: A Meridian Book, 1975.
Four major works by Rousseau are examined. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau discusses the nature of man in society.

Resource Bibliography

Beowulf. Trans. Burton Raffel

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. New York, NY: Bantom Books, 1964.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. New York, NY: Signet Classic, 1968.

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. In *The England Tradition*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1989.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. New York, NY: Random House, 1979.

Materials

These are the necessary materials needed to complete this unit.

1. A video recorder with tripod will be necessary to tape the talk show. The student will operate the video recorder while the talk show is taping.
2. Videotapes of movies listed in Appendix 2.
3. A VCR and television will be needed to view the movies.
4. The students will need access to school library to complete research papers. Books listed in the teacher's bibliography should be reserved prior to assignment.