

The Return of the Lesbian Villain (Apr. 10, 2014, AfterEllen)

We are wary of lesbian villains and for good reason. When the Motion Picture Production code, also called the Hays Code after the real piece of work that enforced it, was established in 1930, it created an atmosphere of fear and mistrust of gay characters for decades to come. Gay characters were considered deviant and thus, no good could come to them. Seriously, no good. It's written into the damn code. Perversion must be punished. (The excellent documentary, *The Celluloid Closet*, based on the book by **Vito Russo**, talks about the Code at length and gives a history LGBTQ characters from the origins of film through the late '90s.) This is where the "Dead Lesbian" trope comes into play. Since lesbian and bisexual characters could not be seen as sympathetic, we become unrequited spinsters and obsessive villainesses.

Even after the Code was done away with in the late sixties, the damage had been done and queer characters continued to occupy the darker spaces of film. We were murderers, manipulative psychos and predatory lesbians.

It was enough to give a girl a complex. The television industry, the ones who forced Lucy and Ricky into separate twin beds, was even further behind. Gender roles were strictly enforced, not allowing for much exploration of anything outside the rigid male/female constructs. Slowly but surely, the tides began to change for lesbian and bisexual characters in the late '80s to mid '90s. The sting of those decades cast as the bad guy still loomed large, so queer characters began to take on a new role: the saintly gay. We weren't evil anymore (yea!) but our squeaky clean, unthreatening image wasn't exactly an accurate representation either. It wasn't for lack of trying however. The moment Ellen went from "lezzie next door" to "actual lady-loving lesbian" in her show's last season, viewers simply turned the channel. The wheels had already been set in motion and soon, more fully-fleshed lesbian and bisexual characters started making their way into our homes and movie theatres.

In 2013, there were over seventy representations of lesbian/bisexual/queer female characters on television. Seventy! In film, the Cannes darling, *Blue is the Warmest Color* was the most talked about movie of the year. We have so many varied portrayals of lesbians, bisexuals and queer women that I think it's time we finally embraced one more.

The villain. Just last week, the television series *Twisted* revealed that new lesbian character, Whitney, could quite possibly be a villain. After a few weeks of growing excitement and positive fan response, things got decidedly sour. I read the comments (yes, I read the comments for all my pieces) and your thoughtful and interesting responses got me thinking. So what if Whitney is a villain? Maybe it's time that we had a few of those. Leading characters in shows like *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *Walking Dead*, and *Scandal* walk the line between anti-hero and villain all the time. *Hannibal*, *The Following*, *American Horror Story* and *House of Cards* don't even try to pretend that their leading characters aren't big, bad, bastards. Viewers eat it up, because it's fun to root for the bad guy sometimes. We love moral ambiguity because it forces us to make our own choices. We are no longer a passive audience. We are smarter and more savvy than we've ever been before. Why shouldn't that translate to lesbian and bisexual characters? Before, we were one dimension. A "thing" that audiences could attach their anxiety and curiosity to. Those characters weren't real people. But they can be now.

An example of this is Paige McCullers from *Pretty Little Liars*. She is one of many *PLL* characters whose motives are not always clear. Some see her as a villain. Others see her as a hero. It is quite possible that in the next season of *Pretty Little Liars*, she could be revealed to be a big bad. So could any other member of the ensemble. I ask, would that be such a bad thing? A villain who makes us feel so deeply that we are willing to go down the rabbit hole with her? That sounds like a hell of a story to me. *Orange is the New Black*'s Alex Vause could be considered a villain. She's the reason that Piper Chapman is behind bars. Revenge and bitterness made her sell Piper out. Isn't that what a villain does? Yet, she's a fascinating character that we want to understand and spend time with. *Lost Girl*'s Evony is the baddest bitch around. Literally, she is the boss of all the baddies. Yet we squeal when she appears onscreen, because we love her attitude and complexity. *True Blood*'s Pam would kill you so much as look at you, but she's a fan favorite. And she is a full-on villain, y'all. So, let's turn some tropes on their heads. Let's take back the lesbian villain and make her our own. Just because we are used to rooting for the good guys, doesn't mean we can't be on board with the bad girls too. Maybe we've come far enough in visibility and representation that queer villains can be part of our story as well. I know there will be some who would argue that LGBT characters still shouldn't be villains because we need as many positive representations as possible out here. I get that, but I think this reasoning doesn't give enough credit to our fellow humans. Having a full range of characters representing the queer community makes us more relatable, not less.

What do you think? Is it time to reclaim the queer villain?