

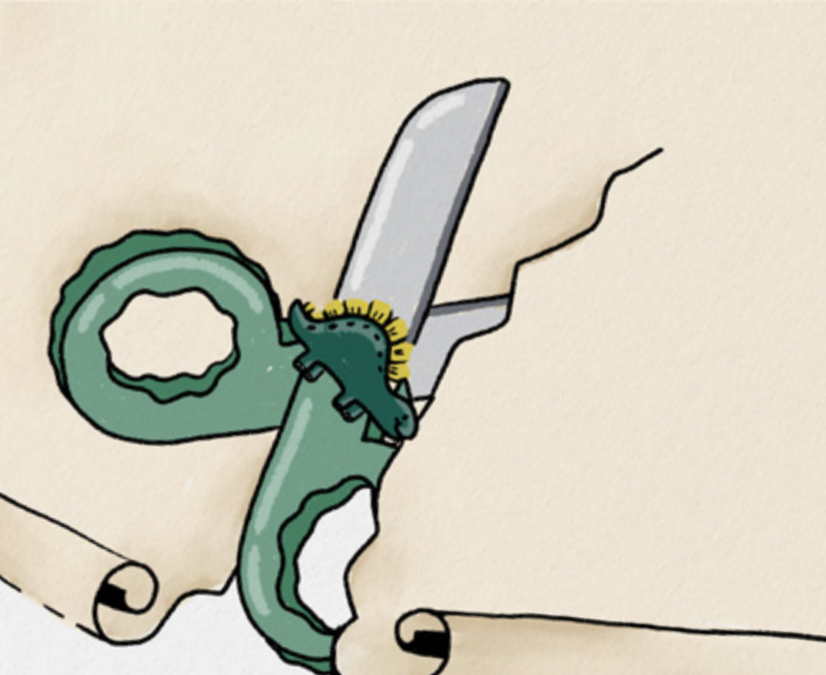
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On Our Love for the Morally Ambiguous Character

I was in my eighth week of kindergarten when I received the coveted “Prize of the Week”: a pair of green plastic scissors. They cut in awkward, squiggly lines and had a little dinosaur on the front. They also were not rightfully mine. You see, I received my allotted prize in week three, meaning Ms R had made a mistake. Enamoured by the prospect of two prizes instead of the standard one, I said nothing. For the following three weeks, I was racked by a guilt so unbearable that my only escape was a tearful confession to Ms R on the final day of school.

This was my first real tussle with morality, the prickly principles of right and wrong that tell us to ridicule *The Little Mermaid*’s Ursula and champion its legless heroine, Ariel. The concept is simple – good vs evil. But what happens when we account for Ursula’s tragic past? She may have been corrupt and power-hungry, but what if this wasn’t a result of malice but misunderstanding? Does this lessen our condemnation?

It’s questions like these that give birth to morally ambiguous characters. Take Villanelle, the psychopathic antagonist of *killing Eve* (2018), or the messy titular protagonist of *Fleabag* (2016). On paper, both women are undeniably “bad” – one a





serial killer, and the other certainly no saint (no spoilers here!) – yet we can't help but root for them, revelling in the delicious delight found in backing the "bad guy".

Moral ambiguity in storytelling is nothing new. Early Greek literature is littered with heroes such as Odysseus and Achilles, who smudge the lines of moral and malevolent. If morality teaches us to seek out the good and cast aside the bad, why do these questionable characters remain so pervasive?

One answer may lie in the egotistical nature of cinema itself. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey employs psychoanalytic models to assert that the pleasure found in spectatorship is derived from our attempts to identify with the onscreen protagonist. Is it any wonder, then, that we are drawn to the morally flawed when we, too, are prone to lapses in virtue? The very fact that our enjoyment of cinema is born from an inherent unconscious narcissism feels like ironic proof enough of these imperfections.

Am I bad because I knowingly took the scissors I wasn't entitled to? Or am I good because I returned them? At what point does the scale tip from one to the other? This is an exhausting line of questioning; one five-year-old me thoroughly explored to no avail. Perhaps the true joy of the morally ambiguous character resides in its rejection of moral binaries. It releases us from the question of good and bad, instead combining the two in a single character that both panders to our quest for identification and soothes the persecution of our less savoury qualities.