



The following is excerpted from Chuck Klosterman's ***I WEAR THE BLACK HAT: GRAPPLING WITH VILLAINS (REAL AND IMAGED)***.

Assignment: Read the excerpt and answer the footnoted questions ***as you go*** – The goal is for your own ideas about “bad guys” to expand, change, or perhaps *solidify*, as you read Klosterman's examination of the modern understanding of villainy.

Klosterman is the *New York Times* bestselling author of five previous works of nonfiction and two novels (*Downtown Owl* and *The Visible Man*). His debut book, *Fargo Rock City*, was a winner of the ASCAP– Deems Taylor Award. He has written for *GQ*, *Esquire*, *Spin*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *The Believer*, and *The A.V. Club*. He currently covers sports and popular culture for ESPN and serves as The Ethicist for *The New York Times Magazine*.¹

It seems like twenty-five lifetimes ago, but it was only twenty-five years: An older friend gave me a cassette ... it was a copy of an album I'd wanted, but the album was only thirty-eight minutes long; that meant there were still seven open minutes at the end of the cassette's A-side. In order to fill the gap, my friend included an extra song by Metallica...The opening lines of the song deeply disturbed me, mostly because I misinterpreted their meaning (although I suspect the guys in Metallica did, too) ...The chorus was malicious and straightforward: “*Am I evil? Yes I am. Am I evil? I am man.*”

I can't remember precisely what I thought when I first heard those words — I was a teenager, so it was probably something creative and contradictory, and I'm relatively positive I imagined a nonexistent comma after the fourth am.² But I do remember how I felt. I was confused and I was interested. And if I could have explained my mental state at fourteen with the clarity of language I have as a forty-year-old, I assume my reaction would have been the same complicated question I ask myself today: Why would anyone want to be evil?

Here's what this book will not be: ... most notably, it will not be a repetitive argument that insists every bad person is not-so-bad and every good person is not-so-good. Rational people already understand that this is how the world is. But if you are not-so-rational — if there are certain characters you simply refuse to think about in a manner that isn't 100 percent negative or 100 percent positive — parts of this book will (mildly) offend you. It will make you angry, and you will find yourself trying to intellectually discount arguments that you might naturally make about other people. This is what happens whenever the things we feel and the things we know refuse to align in the way we're conditioned to pretend.³

Before I started this project, I had lunch with my editor ... We were talking about *Star Wars*, which his four-year-old son had recently watched for the first time. The boy was blown away. In the course of our conversation, I expressed my theory that there's a natural evolution to how male audiences respond to the *Star Wars* franchise: When you're very young, the character you love most is Luke Skywalker (who's entirely good). As you grow older, you gravitate toward Han Solo (who's ultimately good, but superficially bad). But by the time you reach adulthood ... you inevitably find yourself relating to Darth Vader. As an adult, Vader is easily the most intriguing character, and seemingly the only essential one. “I'm not sure all people would agree with your premise,” said my editor. “I think most guys stop evolving at Han Solo.”⁴

¹ What do you think of Klosterman's credentials as a writer?

²How would a comma here change the meaning of the comment?

³ Paraphrase what Klosterman is saying in this paragraph.

⁴ What is your opinion of Klosterman's assessment of men's changing reactions to *Star Wars*? (If you are unfamiliar with the films just comment on the general premise of aligning with good, superficially good, etc)

My editor wanted to know why I wanted to write about villains. I said I could not give a cogent explanation, but that I knew this was the book I wanted to write. “Well, I have my own theory,” he said. “I think I know why you want to do this. I think it’s because you’re afraid that you are actually a villainous person.”

WHAT YOU SAY ABOUT HIS COMPANY IS WHAT YOU SAY ABOUT SOCIETY*

What is the most villainous move on the market? I suppose “murdering a bunch of innocent people” seems like the obvious answer, but it obviously isn’t (there are countless statues of heroes who’ve killed thousands). Electrocuting helpless dogs for the sake of convenience seems almost as diabolical, but not diabolical enough to keep you off the NFL Pro Bowl roster.⁵ Rape is vile; human trafficking is disturbing; blowing up a planet and blotting out the sun are not for the innocent. These are all terrible, terrible things. Yet none of them represent the pinnacle of villainy. None of them embody culture’s most sinister deed.⁶



The most villainous move⁷ any person can make is tying a woman to the railroad tracks. There’s simply no confusion over the implication of this specific act: If you see someone tying a woman to train tracks, you are seeing an unadulterated expression of evil.

Considering its scarcity, it’s unclear how a crime that almost never happened became the definitive Crime Of The (Nineteenth) Century. [There are only 7 documented cases of such a crime.] All told, this is not much train-related violence... Its origin is mostly a theatrical construction. The first “popular” images of humans roped to railroad ties derived from an 1863 British play ... By the dawn of the silent-movie era, the trope had been adopted completely ... But in those cases, the idea is already comedic. It’s satiric melodrama ... a caricature of villainy. It was never based on any legitimate fear.

This is why no nonfictional villain can compete with Snidely Whiplash...the animated villain in the Dudley Do-Right segments of the 1960s cartoon *Rocky and Bullwinkle*.

Based on the silent-movie villain archetype, Whiplash had a waxed mustache and a black hat... He spoke with a hiss and laughed like a maniac. However, his true failing was a compulsion. Snidely Whiplash was obsessed with tying women to railroad tracks. He simply couldn’t stop himself. It was the foundation of his entire ethos... There didn’t seem to be any financial upside or competitive advantage; Snidely Whiplash just enjoyed placing Canadian women in a position where they wait to die...loved the idea of his victims hearing the chug-chug-chug of the machine that would kill them ... even though that sadistic lag time did not benefit him in any way (beyond giving him a few extra moments to stroke his mustache). There was no thinking behind his sadism; it was just something he did, seemingly every day of his cartoon life. He had no external purpose. His only motive for tying women to railroad tracks was that tying women to railroad tracks was what he did.



So we begin, I suppose, with a question: What’s scarier — a villain with a motive, or a villain without one?⁸

⁵ What current event is alluded to in this paragraph?

⁶ What is ironic about Klosterman’s tone considering his subject matter in this paragraph? What is the best way to describe his tone and how does he do it?

⁷ What does he mean by the word “move”?

⁸ Comment on this question. It’s been preceded by a comedic, satirical introduction, but is it in fact a scary premise to consider?

MACHIAVELLI

Machiavelli poses a problem ... He is both famous and unknown — a polarizing figure regularly referenced by people who know nothing about his existence, or even his first name.

The one thing we all collectively understand about Machiavelli is the eponym **Machiavellian**⁹, a catch-all term for the attainment of power through cunning. It's almost a compliment, but only to an especially self-absorbed criminal ... This perception can be inferred through much of his writing catalog, although the only book that really matters is *The Prince* [published five years after the author's death]. There are some undeniably radical ideas in *The Prince*; the ideas might seem self-evident in the present day, but they exploded minds in the sixteenth century. The biggest idea reconsiders the reality of motive: Throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, monarchies operated (or at least pretended to operate) ...and believed (or at least claimed to believe) that the best way for any ruler to succeed was through virtue; if the **populace** saw their leader as righteous and noble and pure, they would be more likely to support and follow him. To be a good king, you had to be a good person (or so the thinking went). *The Prince* argues that this kind of principle is ridiculous and naïve; instead, Machiavelli suggests that the essential key to attaining and holding power was being powerful ... being feared is better than being loved. Laws are essential, but they're nothing more than constructions (and they work only if the **populace**¹⁰ cowers to the concept of state domination). Instead of allowing life to happen by chance, whatever one desires should be pursued and taken. If you have to slay a bunch of your enemies, do so on the first day of the job; that way, you'll seem nicer in the future ... A prince "must not have any other object or any other thought, nor must he adopt anything as his art but war," the author plainly states.

...I need to note something important: It's entirely possible (and perhaps even probable) that Machiavelli was being sarcastic. In fact, that seems to be the ever-encroaching consensus. *The Prince* was very controversial for a very long time, but those who have studied the writer most tend to believe it was intended as a criticism of human nature. For example, Salman Rushdie adores Machiavelli... he said in 2008 - "To put it simply, Machiavelli was not Machiavellian. His name has come to stand for cynicism and deviousness and ruthlessness and power politics, all because of this little book, *The Prince*. . . he wrote **not** about how he would like things to be like, but how power actually worked, through what he had observed. It's a classic case of shooting the messenger. Here's a man who understood the nature of power and made the mistake of writing it down too clearly."¹¹

What matters to me is why Machiavelli's connotation will always, always be **pejorative**¹², no matter how much unconventional wisdom suggests the opposite. ... What was his mistake?

His mistake was consciousness.

The Prince can be read like a self-help book for someone who openly aspires to be depraved: *This is what's important to believe, this is how the powerful should act in public, this is how you need to behave in private, et cetera*. It's a clinical dissection of how to be tyrannical.

Whether Machiavelli believed these things is beside the point — what matters is that he presented them as pure stratagem. It was not an emotional reaction to a specific circumstance; it was a calculated design for life, usable by anyone, applicable anywhere...This is what makes Machiavelli culturally unlikable. It makes him cold. The mere

⁹ Define Machiavellian as it is explained in the paragraph:

¹⁰ What does populace mean based on the context clues you are given?

¹¹ Summarize Rushdie's thoughts regarding Machiavelli's reputation.

¹² Based on context, what do you think is the meaning of the word pejorative?

fact that he could conceive of these strategies — even if he'd never have used them himself — is what makes him sinister forever. And he is not the only one.¹³

So this, I suspect, is where we really begin: In any situation, the villain is the person who knows the most but cares the least.¹⁴

[A MODERN EXAMPLE: JOE PATERNO]

“Whatever the details of the investigation are, this much is clear to me: There is a villain in this tragedy that lies in that investigation, not in Joe Paterno’s response to it.”

These are the words of Nike CEO Phil Knight, speaking at Paterno’s funeral in January of 2012. The room gave Knight a standing ovation. The world did not.

All funerals are sad, but Paterno’s was sad for an uncommon reason. Paterno’s funeral was sad because just about everyone who cared about him secretly wished he had died six months earlier. It was sad because it was impossible not to imagine Paterno’s final moments, when the only conclusion he could have drawn was that everything he’d done with his life was somehow not worth it. It was sad because the final weeks of his life were far sadder than the literal end of it, and not because of what was happening to his body.

It has always been my belief that people are remembered for the sum of their accomplishments but defined by their singular failure.¹⁵ In the case of Paterno, that supposition does not go far enough. He was, by almost any subjective or objective metric, among the two or three greatest college football coaches of the twentieth century. He finished his career with the most wins in NCAA history, including five undefeated seasons and two national championships. Yet those victories represent only half the equation: For the first forty-five of his forty-six years at Penn State, Paterno was seen as the single-most honorable member in a profession not known for honor. He legitimized collegiate football in the Northeast without jeopardizing the region’s academic reputation (a seemingly impossible dream when he took the job in 1966). If you wanted to cite an example of a major college program where the players still went to class, you used Penn State. If you wanted to argue that you could challenge for a national title without bending rules, Penn State was the silver bullet in your rhetorical revolver. This was almost entirely due to one man.¹⁶ Yet all of that will become a secondary memory, solely because Paterno knew something he didn’t care about enough.

There’s no reason to rehash the details of what happened to Penn State’s football program. The story is simple — the team’s longtime defensive coordinator, Jerry Sandusky, was a pedophile and a rapist. We’ll never know how many adolescent boys he molested during his time at PSU, but he was convicted on forty-five counts. Sandusky was so brazen about his depravity that he [raped a 10 year old boy] in the showers of the Nittany Lions’ locker room, which is how he was finally caught by a Penn State graduate assistant named Mike McQueary in 2002.¹⁷ The day after a dumbfounded McQueary witnessed the assault, he went to Paterno and told him what he saw.

This is the point where Paterno ruined his own life.¹⁸

¹³ Paraphrase Klosterman’s feelings about why people regard Machiavelli negatively?

¹⁴ Comment on this supposition. Do you agree or disagree? Explain. Can you think of an example of someone who fits this description?

¹⁵ Comment on this statement. Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

¹⁶ Summarize the reputation once held by Paterno and the Penn State football program.

¹⁷ Sandusky was retired for PSU at this point and leading the charity The Second Mile. as part of his retirement package, he had an office on PSU property and would often take Second Mile kids around the football facilities.

¹⁸ Describe the author’s style with the sentence; how does it impact the reader?

He did not go to the police, nor did he go to Sandusky and demand that he turn himself in. Instead, he followed the letter of the law: He informed his direct superior, athletic director Tim Curley. Paterno's explanation: "I didn't know what to do. I had not seen anything. Jerry didn't work for me anymore. I didn't have anything to do with him. I tried to look through the Penn State guidelines to see what I was supposed to do. It said I was supposed to call Tim. So I called him." Here is where the unraveling begins. His analysis of the protocol is highly deceptive; referring to Curley as Paterno's "superior" is a little like referring to Rebecca Black as Thom Yorke's "industry peer."¹⁹ Paterno's stature at Penn State dwarfed not only Curley's, but that of the university president. He was more powerful than the totality of the PSU faculty. So even while Paterno followed procedure, he totally failed.²⁰ He was the only person at Penn State truly accountable for the culture that existed there. He was the only person who could have done anything. And what he chose to do was pretend that this problem did not exist. He coached football for another eight and a half years, until Sandusky was finally busted for sexual impropriety at a high school. The scandal broke and Paterno was terminated. His firing was controversial, because Paterno was deeply beloved ... But the **objective world** realized he had to pay.²¹ He knew too much and did too little.

Two months after his firing, Paterno was dead from lung cancer. Those who interviewed him near the end insisted he wasn't unhappy ... I suppose that's possible, but I'll never believe it. Paterno cared about his reputation at least as much as he cared about winning. This was a guy who majored in English at Brown. His favorite poet was Virgil. He knew how his obit was going to read.²²

[There's something else here that needs to be mentioned, because it's critical to how the situation is understood: Let's say McQueary doesn't walk into the locker room on that particular day in 2002. Let's say he decides he's hungry and goes to McDonald's instead. He never sees the rape, so he never talks to Paterno. The story still emerges eight years later, and Sandusky still goes to prison. The university is still humiliated. But is Paterno still destroyed? Would he still be at fault? The culture he created at Penn State would still have facilitated the crime. I suppose the question comes down to whether you believe that Paterno always knew something was deeply wrong with Sandusky, even before McQueary proved that there was. There had been allegations against Sandusky in 1999, but the initial investigation collapsed. Still, it's hard to accept that Paterno did not suspect there was something askew with his defensive coordinator (particularly since Posnanski's posthumous biography, Paterno, claims that JoePa actively disliked Sandusky). Throughout the 1990s, many believed that Sandusky was Paterno's heir apparent as head coach, but he mysteriously retired at the conclusion of the '99 season. Why did he make that decision? Did someone make it for him? We will never know what Paterno knew, but it was certainly more than he admitted. In fact, he might have known everything. He even created an exit strategy: During the same month in 2011 that Paterno learned prosecutors were (again) investigating Sandusky, Paterno renegotiated his contract with the university. This new contract would allow him to stop coaching after the 2011 season for a \$ 3 million lump sum, plus the forgiveness of interest-free loans the school had given him totaling \$ 350,000 and use of the university's private plane.]²³²⁴

Sandusky's role in this affair is easy to define: He was the monster. In fact, he was so over -the-top monstrous that people almost stopped thinking about him (according to ESPN media watchdog Patrick Burns, Sandusky's name was mentioned on *SportsCenter* a paltry eight times during the week of Paterno's funeral). McQueary was marginalized as the scenario's coward (evidently because he didn't pull out a crossbow and murder Sandusky in the shower).²⁵ The children were the helpless victims; the university was the figurehead of institutional evil; the popularity of college football was the atrocity's philosophical root. All those imperfect denunciations are easy. But

¹⁹ What does this mean? Who are Rebecca Black and Thom Yorke? (Look them up if you don't know.)

²⁰ Why does Klosterman say Paterno failed? What should he have done?

²¹ Explain what the author means by "objective world" – what is he suggesting about others?

²² What is the purpose of Klosterman citing Paterno's educational background? What is he trying to say?

²³ What point is Klosterman trying to make with this digression?

²⁴ What evidence does he offer to support his belief that McQueary's statement is not the only knowledge Paterno had of Sandusky's behavior? Is this evidence convincing?

²⁵ What is Klosterman implying with his parenthetical comment?

Paterno's vilification is harder.²⁶ A handful of media bottom-feeders reveled in his fall, but only to play to the trolls. No normal person wants to hate a dead man he once admired. It feels abnormal and cheap. But what's the alternative? Paterno knew what was happening and chose to intellectually avoid it. He had to choose between humanity and sport, and he picked the one that mattered less. On the day he was finally lowered into the ground, his most adamant defender was the aforementioned Phil Knight, a man who allowed Indonesian children to work in sweatshops so that he could sell \$ 120 basketball shoes to fat American teenagers who didn't play basketball.²⁷ And then — six months later — even Knight rescinded what he'd said. It was not a good look.

The villain is the person who knows the most but cares the least.²⁸

²⁶ What does vilify mean? Why does Klosterman contend that it is harder for people to vilify Paterno?

²⁷ What is Klosterman's opinion of Knight?

²⁸ Now comment on this supposition. Look back at the first time I asked you to respond to it. Have your thoughts changed? Explain.