

## **Why Would You Feel Bad for the Bad Guy?**

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There is a teenage boy who lives in New York City. He comes from a loving, caring family of five. With two little sisters, he is looked up to as a role model, and he tries his best to fill these big shoes. He excels in school and often helps his classmates when they get confused or ask for help. The community sees him for who he is: a kind, gentle boy with a bright future ahead of him. And his parents? They could not be prouder. Every day they have a family dinner where this boy tells his family, in the most modest way possible, about all he accomplished that day in school and in his extracurriculars. His parents express their pride for having raised such a perfect, young man. But he is not perfect. After a routine trip to the doctor, this boy's father is told that his son has Facioscapulohumeral muscular dystrophy, a genetic disorder that will make his bones weaker over time until he is left in paralysis. This boy does not know that there is anything wrong with him because his father does not have the heart to tell him. So, the boy goes on living his exemplary life, but occasionally, has a few slip ups. One time he fell down the stairs while carrying textbooks, and another time he fainted in public.

This sweet, innocent boy starts to realize that something is wrong with him, but he knows that people with genetic disorders are not allowed in their society. Upon finally realizing the truth, this boy decides to do what is best for society. Although his father wanted to keep the disease a secret because he did not want to lose his only son, he also raised him to be so perfect in every way. He had impeccable behavior, a positive attitude, and followed all of the rules. Following his dad's example of how to live a good, proud life, this boy turns himself into the local authorities to be killed. Do you feel bad for this young, innocent boy?

What if I now told you that this boy, Thomas Smith, was a Nazi and that his father was Obergruppenführer John Smith, one of the highest-ranking members in the entire Reich. Have your feelings changed? Does being a Nazi make things different? Do you sympathize with him less? He is still the same boy described earlier. Nothing has changed, except possibly your perception of this boy.

The television show, *The Man in the High Castle*, takes place in the 1960s in a world where the Allies lost World War II (Thrall). Because of this, Nazi Germany took over the eastern half of the United States, now called the Greater Nazi Reich, and the Japanese took over the West coast, now called the Japanese Pacific States (Thrall). There is a neutral zone in between the two empires that acts like a lawless wild west. The show is about a woman named Juliana Crain who finds films that seem to show a different world; one where the United States of America actually won the war. In order to figure out how to stop the oppression from the Nazis and the Japanese, she goes on a journey to find the person responsible for the films: The Man in the High Castle.

The audience of the show is introduced to Thomas Smith early on in the show's three-season run, and it is clear that the boy is a Nazi. What the producers and directors of the show do, though, is show Thomas as an average, likable character. He helps his classmates, plays with his sisters, and makes his parents proud, but he does all of this with a big swastika patch on his arm. Now you may think that you could never feel bad for a Nazi, right? That is what I thought too before Thomas found out about his disease. In this world, anyone with a genetic disorder is to be exterminated so that the unfavorable genes do not get passed onto the next generation, and after two entire seasons of watching Thomas grow into the passionate, sweet young man that he is, the audience is taken for an emotional roller coaster ride when Thomas volunteers to turn himself in without telling his parents or sisters. The reason why this moment is so bittersweet is

because even though most of the audience grows to love Thomas for the gentle, kind boy he is, we all know that he would have grown up to be just like his father and the rest of the Nazi party, killing minorities and pushing agendas for the master race. *The Man in the High Castle* challenges us to feel sympathy and empathy for just about anyone, no matter who they are and what they have done.

I wanted to explore why I felt sympathetic for Thomas after my first time watching the show, even as a Jew. I wondered how I could be rooting for and against the Resistance, the Japanese, and even the Nazis, all within the course of a few episodes. According to Liza Aziz-Zadeh of the Brain and Creativity Institute of the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, people often have a strong interest in paying close attention to, and potentially empathizing with the pain of our enemies (Dvorsky). Aziz-Zadeh conducted a study by using and reviewing fMRI brain scans. She brought in a handful of volunteers who were all white, Jewish, males, and showed them two different videos. The first video depicted an anti-Semite in pain, while the second showed a non-hateful, likable person in pain. In a bizarre finding, the volunteers' pain matrices were most activated while watching the anti-Semite feel pain (Dvorsky). The implications of this study are astronomical and relate back to another character in *The Man in the High Castle*: Frank Frink. Frank's sister, niece, and nephew were all killed in a gas chamber simply because their grandfather was Jewish. Frank also had half of his body scorched by a fire when he was in a building that was bombed in the season two finale. There is a lot to feel bad about for Frank, and yet, Thomas is arguably easier to sympathize with. When connected to the study, Frank would represent the "likable" person in pain while Thomas would represent the anti-Semite in pain. Just like the data indicated in the study, people like Thomas will receive more sympathy.

In order to figure out why the audience can sympathize with Thomas more than Frank, we need to take a step back by looking at sympathy as a whole. According to Craig Taylor in his piece called "Sympathy" published in *The Journal of Ethics*, sympathy is "the phenomenon of being moved by the suffering of another." He also argues that sympathy is a primitive response, meaning that it is done almost immediately without thinking and that it is extremely complex. He also states that we usually cannot explain our feelings of sympathy. Often times we cannot pinpoint a specific reason why we sympathize with someone. So the question now becomes, how do we explain our feelings of sympathy for people who do bad things if sympathy really is that complicated?

One way to answer this question is to look at science, and more specifically, psychology. There are many different interpretations from esteemed psychologists that could help us figure out why we feel sympathetic for people that do bad things. Psychiatrist Carl Jung believed that in order to grow as human beings, we need to confront our "shadow selves" (Langley). The shadow self is basically the part of your mind and personality that is the exact opposite as your own (Langley). Jung said that by understanding our shadow selves, we can get stronger. So too, we like to understand villains because they often reflect the protagonist and make them stronger. In the process of understanding them, we often feel their emotions, including pain (Langley). The easiest example of this comes from the 2007 movie, *Spider-Man 3*. In the movie, Peter Parker's suit turns black, controlling him and bringing out the darker side of his personality. In order to overcome this challenge and grow stronger as a person, Peter needs to fight the darkness within himself. This emphasizes the ideas behind Jung's model of the shadow self because Peter Parker is able to grow as a human being and become stronger after confronting his opposite personality and character traits. Jung's theory would point to feeling sympathetic for the bad guy as a way to make the good guy that much better.

Another interpretation comes from Sigmund Freud who believes that every person naturally gravitates toward the id, which is the concept of acting with innate instinctive impulses (Langley). Instead of following the id, though, Freud thought that people were confined by society, forcing their id to hide within. This interpretation would make an audience connect with the villain because they are the ones that do what we all want to do: let our id take over. After all, characters in movies and shows seem to have two things that many people would want: unlimited freedom and a lot of power (Langley). To see Freud's work in action, one can look towards the extremely popular 2008 drama and thriller, *The Dark Knight*, in which Heath Ledger's performance of the Joker made the entire movie. There is a reason why people loved the Joker in that movie and it has to do with the appeal of running around the city like a mad-man doing whatever you want. It is clear that the Joker takes joy in what he does and treats his crimes as an elaborate game. This joyous freedom and power combined with a big smile and laugh from Heath Ledger, makes the audience connect to the villain, even if just slightly. The interpretations of both Jung and Freud play into *The Man in the High Castle*. The shadow self example is important for members of the resistance, like Juliana, because Nazis like Thomas end up making them stronger through their complex relationship. Freud's beliefs are reinforced, too, as the Nazis and Japanese flaunt their ids throughout the series, something that the resistance members cannot do.

The other way of looking at why we sympathize with characters that do bad things has less to do with science and more to do with how filmmakers want you to react to a movie or show. According to Professor Joseph Magliano and Associate Professor Angela Grippo, filmmakers have two main cinematography techniques that they use to force the audience to feel a certain way. The first way is done by the actors. Facial expressions are often universal across cultures and are a great way to show the viewer how a character

may be feeling (Magliano and Grippo). In our case, with sympathy, filmmakers can make the audience sympathize with even the worst characters by using an actor or actress with very passionate facial expressions. Although Quinn Lord, the actor who plays Thomas, is only a teenager, he gives one of the best and most convincing performances out of the entire cast. This alone is not going to get people to feel bad for a Nazi, though.

The second main technique that filmmakers use is even more important; it is using point of view (Magliano and Grippo). Any time the director can give the audience a backstory for a villain, they will. This is because they want their main characters to be dynamic, not static. A dynamic character is one with many complicated aspects to their storyline, and they often experience change over the course of the movie or television series. Most good villains are dynamic to make them more interesting. A villain who does bad things for no apparent reason will not play as well with the audience as one that has some prior motivation or traumatic life event that sent them down the wrong path giving their inner id a way to get out. Once a filmmaker can tell the story from the villain's perspective, the audience begins to understand what they are going through and can then sympathize with them more (Magliano and Grippo). Unlike other characters in the show, the audience gets to see what happens in Thomas' personal life. We see how he lives his life at home, at school, and in public. We watch him care for his sisters while his parents are not home and help his classmates out with schoolwork. Seeing things from Thomas' perspective, it is clear that all he is trying to do is make his father proud and wear the Smith family name with dignity. These are common struggles that many teenagers go through, building a connection with the audience. Is this enough for the audience to overlook his Nazi roots, though?

Developing a strong point of view for a villain does not seem like a compelling enough reason to sympathize with characters who commit such horrific crimes. That

being said, the power of point of view is stronger than you may think. Take Walter White, for example; he is the perfect example of what is called an antihero. The *Merriam Webster* definition of an antihero is “a protagonist or notable figure who is conspicuously lacking in heroic qualities” (“Antihero”). If you have ever seen the TV show, *Breaking Bad*, then you know that Walter White, played by Bryan Cranston, is a protagonist who is anything but a hero. Trying to describe to someone who does not watch the show why anyone would root for Mr. White as he uses his chemistry knowledge to cook and sell methamphetamine while killing people who get in his way is nearly impossible. And yet, we do root for him. A great deal of the audience loves Walter White while buying into his point of view. This can be seen in numerous fan pages and reviews of the show. There is even a “Save Walter White” site modeled after the one created on the show to accept (fake) donations to support his chemotherapy. Mr. White develops lung cancer that will most likely kill him, so the meth selling was a way to leave money behind for his family. Not convinced to root for him yet? The directors went even further. This family that Walter wants to leave money for consists of both a newly born baby and a son with cerebral palsy, Flynn. Is it a coincidence that his son has a disability and his daughter is a baby? Not in the slightest. All of these contributing factors lead a lot of the audience to jump on board with Walter’s mission, no matter how far it takes him. Since the show ended over five years ago, people have had time to go back, rewatch it, and really analyze Walter’s character, and yet, the online support is still there.

So, let’s bring the conversation back to Thomas Smith in *The Man in the High Castle*. Why might the audience feel bad for him while not feeling bad for some of the other notable Nazis in the show like Erich Raeder, Martin Huesmann, or Heinrich Himmler? All three of these Nazis were killed at some point during the three seasons, but it does not really seem to matter to the audience aside from the fact that it contributes to the plot.

The answer here also comes back to those two cinematography techniques. The facial expressions are subtle throughout the series but escalate in the conversation that Thomas has with his parents when he finally learns about his incurable disease (Tallerico).



Thomas: "I've let you down. I'm a useless eater."<sup>1</sup>

Helen (Thomas' mother): "No, you haven't..."

Thomas: "I'm so sorry."

John (Thomas' father): "Do you have any idea how proud we are of you?"

Thomas: "But I'm defective."

Helen: "Don't you ever say that. No, to us you... you are perfect" (Dick).

As you can see from this snapshot of a conversation, emotional words paired with powerful facial expressions could very well do the trick. The tear trickling down Thomas' face was yet another trick production threw in to really toy with the audience's emotions.

Many of the other prominent Nazi characters that died did not have scenes with very heartfelt facial emotions. In addition, the audience never really sees their points of view. The only time these other characters appear is as a byproduct of more important characters being on the screen. For example, Erich Raeder is John Smith's main assistant who often takes care of all of the dirty work. The viewers of the show never see Raeder









