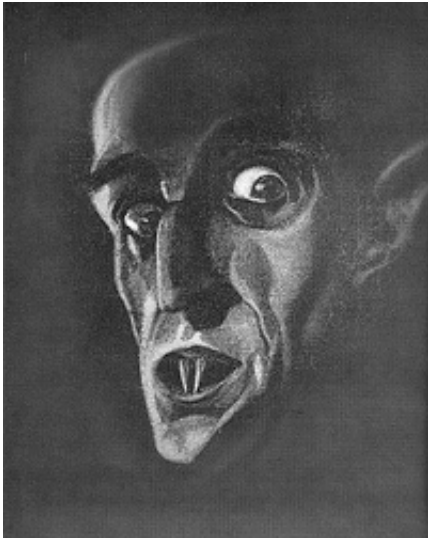


Probing Question: Why are albinos always cast as villains?

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The 'evil albino' can be traced back to other pale villains, including the vampire Nosferatu, seen here in a drawing by Albin Grau for a 1921 silent film. Credit: Penn State

The evil albino has been a stock Hollywood character for decades. Foul Play, End of Days, The Matrix Reloaded, and Cold Mountain are but a few examples of recent films with deranged or sadistic albino antagonists. Now, in The Da Vinci Code, he's baaaaack—in the person of Silas, a self-flagellating assassin-monk—and some members of the albino community are upset.

In an interview with the Associated Press, Mike McGowan, President of

The National Organization of Albinism and Hypopigmentation (NOAH), says, "The problem is there has been no balance. There are no realistic, sympathetic or heroic characters with albinism that you can find in movies or popular culture."

Albinism is a set of inherited conditions, the most predominant of which is decreased pigment in the eyes, skin, or hair. An albino's genes do not produce as much melanin as those of someone without albinism, and the result is paleness or absence of color.

Other symptoms may include vision problems, such as extreme near or far-sightedness, and increased skin sensitivity to the Sun's ultraviolet rays. Albinos may be subjected to alienation from their peers, which can result in emotional problems, but otherwise, people with albinism experience normal growth and development and have lifespans equal to those without albinism. A violent disposition and a knack for deception have yet to be scientifically linked to the condition.

So the question remains: Why does Hollywood pick on the pale guys?

Mary Beth Oliver, Penn State professor of communications, who researches the psychological effects of media, says sometimes it comes down to simple expediency. "The media industry often employs certain images in movies because they're a convenient or inexpensive way of achieving the desired audience response. An albino character is created with as little as powdery white make-up, a light blonde or white wig, and blue or reddish contact lenses, where other characters may require elaborate and expensive special effects techniques."

Experts also suggest that albinos are common in villainous roles because of a perceived likeness to other scary creatures. Robert Lima, professor emeritus of Spanish and comparative literature at Penn State, in his recent book, *Studies of Evil*, traces the history of occultism in theater

and drama. "Since albinos are deprived of normal skin and hair pigmentation and their eyes feature blue or pink irises," Lima says, "it's easy to understand how supernatural connotations have attached to them." For instance, he says, an albino resembles a vampire "in that both have the paleness of death," and a werewolf, which shares "the fiery-red pupils that menace potential victims in the dark of the night."

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Lima sees references to yet another familiar horror type, the zombie, "since its features and single-mindedness are close to those of Silas." Though he claims that "*The Da Vinci Code* doesn't play upon these associations," he says that the resemblance to the 'walking dead' is evident. "It's understandable how such qualities of Silas can lead to a potential albino-vampire relationship."

Are movies capable of creating prejudice against people with albinism?

According to Oliver, "To portray any group as one-dimensional is a problematic thing. Even if negative portrayals are infrequent, if it's the case that every time albinos are depicted, it's negatively, then the images become connected. Demonization of any group," she adds, "runs the risk of affecting us in ways we might not be aware of."

McGowan notes that "Silas is just the latest in a long string." Given the economic and psychological reasons for albino movie villains, it seems likely that the string will continue to lengthen. As long as 'the evil albino' is cast in movies as popular as *The Da Vinci Code*, our perception of albinism may remain ironically dark.

Source: by Lauren Clark, Research/Penn State

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