

Using Robert Greene's 48 Laws of Power to Create a Killer Antagonist Presentation Notes

by T.O. Paine

The Story of Wu Chao

Wu Chao was born in 625 A.D to a duke, and because of her exquisite beauty, she was attached to the Emperor's harem. However, the Emperor's harem was a dangerous place, full of young concubines vying to become his favorite. But, by using her beauty and forceful character, she quickly rose to the top of the hierarchy.

She eventually befriended the empress of China while sleeping with the emperor. The empress did not discourage this because she had yet to provide the emperor with an heir, and she thought Wu could help in some way. Wu came to her defense many times, and she regarded Wu as an ally.

Then, after many years in 654, Wu gave birth to a child and made her move. One day the empress came to visit, and as soon as the Empress had left, Wu smothered the newborn. She killed her own baby. When the murder was discovered, suspicion immediately fell on the empress, who had been on the scene moments earlier, and whose jealous nature was known by all. People knew she had been jealous of Wu's baby because she hadn't been able to provide the Emperor with an heir.

Shortly after that, the empress was charged with murder and executed. Wu Chao was crowned empress in her place. Her new husband, addicted to his life of pleasure, gladly gave up control of the government to Wu Chao. He was still the Emperor on paper, but she began to take the real power.

So, pretty evil, huh? Think about that . . . your own child. Killing your own child just to become a leader. But it didn't stop there. She loved the power of being the empress, and she'd do anything to keep it. She went on to have more children, and her family expanded.

In 675, people started touting one of Wu's sons as the most probable heir for when her the emperor might die. Wu poisoned him by mixing clay into his food, killing a second child of her own. She had a niece who began spending a lot of time with the emperor, so Wu poisoned her by mixing clay into her food. Her next eldest son was illegitimate, but she still feared he

might assume power one day, so she exiled him on trumped-up charges. Finally, she had her youngest son declared unfit to rule based on his mental disabilities, and he was put away for life.

By this time, people outside her family had begun to really dislike her. Over the next five years, they staged innumerable coups, but all of them failed, and she had every conspirator executed. By 688 there was literally no one left to challenge her reign. She became the first and only female “Emperor” of China. Now that’s power.

This story was taken directly from Law #15 in *The 48 Laws of Power* — Crush Your Enemy Totally. Before she started executing that law, she had very little power, and in the reality of life, she was kind of a flat character. Ultimately, she became a serial killer with this law of power in her arsenal.

The Goal of Applying the Laws of Power

“Make your villain: BELIEVABLE, JUSTIFIABLE, and RELATABLE.”

Villains are real people too. They should be as well-rounded as the hero.

The book: The 48 Laws of Power

The 48 Laws of Power is made up of hundreds of stories, spanning 3000 years of history. The stories describe and validate the 48 ways people obtained and used power. The author, Robert Greene, wrote the book because he wanted to know how people obtained and used power to get ahead in life. While writing it, he focused on the honest truth by example of people throughout history. He wrote it without passing moral judgment on what people in history did to obtain and exercise power. Because of this, a lot of people attacked him and the book because it describes how to execute each of the laws without addressing ethical issues.

The book has been described as “The Bible for Atheists.” *The New Yorker* called it, “A Manual for How to be a Creep.” It is the second most banned book in US prisons because they don’t want criminals to learn how to manipulate each other and the world when they get out. Given this kind of attention, what better book to use to create a realistic villain? As a thriller writer, I want my villains to know what’s in this book.

Organization of The 48 Laws of Power

Nearly every chapter in the book has these sections: Judgment, Transgression, Observance, Keys to Power, and Reversal. For example, Law #43 “Work on the Hearts and Minds of Others, has all five sections.

The Judgment section is the Description of the Law.

“You must seduce others into wanting to move in your direction. A person you have seduced becomes your loyal pawn. And the way to seduce others is to operate on their individual psychologies and weaknesses.”

The Transgression section tells the reader what will happen if the law isn’t followed. For Law #43, this section tells the story of Marie Antoinette. She loved getting dressed up, throwing extravagant parties, and building beautiful gardens she could lounge in, ignoring her countrymen. Marie didn’t do anything to get into the minds and hearts of the people. She ignored them and eventually became a pariah and died on the guillotine.

The Observance section tells a story explaining the benefits to the villain if they adhere to the law. For Law #43, this section tells the story of Chuko Liang, a master war strategist in China. After barely winning a small battle against an army led by a man named Menghou, Chuko allowed all of the captured soldiers to return to their families. Menghou vowed to attack Chuko again, and he did, but he lost again. He lost because Chuko had gotten into the hearts and minds of Menghou’s men. Menghou attacked six more times, with larger armies, but he lost every battle because Chuko had gotten into his men’s hearts.

The Keys to Power section is the scary one to critics of the book. It is the “How-To” section. For Law #43, this section specifies a detailed way to pander to someone’s self-interest. This pandering will get you into their mind and heart and allow you to manipulate them.

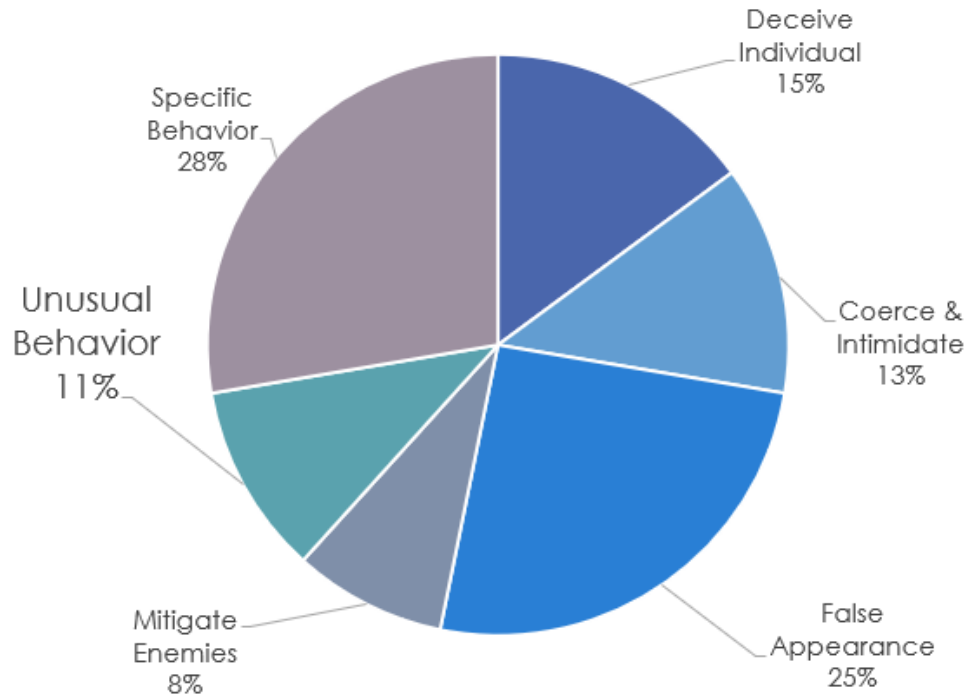
The Reversal section explains what happens if the law is taken too far and backfires and describes situations when you should back off and stop doing the law. This section is not useful for creating villains.

Analysis of The 48 Laws of Power

The laws ranked from most evil to least evil.

<p>#17 Keep Others in Suspended Terror: Cultivate an Air of Unpredictability #27 Play on People's Need to Believe to Create a Cult-like Following #3 Conceal Your Intentions #42 Strike the Shepherd and the Sheep Will Scatter #44 Disarm and Infuriate with the Mirror Effect #37 Create Compelling Spectacles</p>	<p>Pure Evil: Murderous</p>
<p>#14 Pose as a Friend, Work as a Spy #7 Get Others to Do the Work for You, but Always Take the Credit #31 Control the Options: Get Others to Play with the Cards You Deal #39 Stir Up Waters to Catch Fish #8 Make Other People Come to You – Use Bait if Necessary #11 Learn to Keep People Dependent on You #32 Play to People's Fantasies #43 Work on the Hearts and Minds of Others #26 Keep Your Hands Clean #15 Crush Your Enemy Totally #33 Discover Each Man's Thumbscrew #12 Use Selective Honesty and Generosity to Disarm Your Victim</p>	<p>Evil: Permanent Damage</p>
<p>#41 Avoid Stepping into a Great Man's Shoes #2 Never Put Too Much Trust in Friends, Learn How to Use Enemies #19 Know Who You're Dealing With – Do Not Offend the Wrong Person #22 Use the Surrender Tactic: Transform Weakness into Power #5 So Much Depends on Reputation – Guard It With Your Life #24 Play the Perfect Courtier #6 Court Attention at All Costs #21 Play a Sucker to Catch a Sucker – Seem Dumber Than Your Mark #20 Do Not Commit to Anyone #48 Assume Formlessness #38 Think as You Like but Behave Like Others #46 Never Appear Too Perfect #36 Disdain Things You Cannot Have: Ignoring Them is the Best Revenge #34 Be Royal in Your Own Fashion: Act Like a King to Be Treated Like One #13 When Asking for Help, Appeal to People's Self-Interest, Never to Their Mercy or Gratitude #30 Make Your Accomplishments Seem Effortless #1 Never Outshine the Master #35 Master the Art of Timing</p>	<p>Somewhat Evil: Deception</p>
<p>#16 Use Absence to Increase Respect and Honor #18 Do Not Build Fortresses to Protect Yourself – Isolation is Dangerous #4 Always Say Less Than Necessary #9 Win Through Your Actions, Never Through Argument #28 Enter Action with Boldness #23 Concentrate Your Forces #45 Preach the Need for Change, but Never Reform Too Much at Once #47 Do Not Go Past the Mark You Aimed For; In Victory, Learn When to Stop #29 Plan All the Way to the End #10 Infection: Avoid the Unhappy and Unlucky #25 Recreate Yourself #40 Despise the Free Lunch</p>	<p>Not Evil</p>

The laws are grouped into Tactic Categories. These categories are: Unusual Behavior, Coerce & Intimidate, False Appearance, Deceive Individual, Mitigate Enemies, and Specific behavior. The tactics are spread fairly evenly across the laws.



How to Use the Laws to Enhance a Villain

Choose 3-7 laws to apply to your villain.

For each law:

- 1) Use the Judgment section to give your villain a new belief about life,
- 2) Write a Transgression story for your villain, describing what would happen if they do not follow the law.
- 3) Write an Observance story for your villain, describing the benefits of following the law.
- 4) Use the “Keys to Power” section to identify specific thoughts and actions your villain can execute in your novel.

The new belief, the stories, and the thoughts and actions can all affect the plot and scene construction for your novel in addition to making your villain realistic.