

# CHARACTER

What is character?

*Character* has two relevant definitions. First, a character can be a role in a fictional piece, the *dramatic persona*, for example, the father or the boss. Such characters tend to have specific ages and particular physical features. Often, these are the people you wind up with when you use software or questionnaires to define your characters.

Second is the question of *character*: the ethical or moral standards at the heart of the matter, or the internal landscape that affects the external behavior. Simply, *the heart of the person*. As writers, when we speak of character, we speak of this internal landscape brought out by behavior. While there may be many roles in any piece, this heart and soul is the character of your hero and also your villain. It always means the sum of the spirit and emotional history of the person and the behavior that we can see as a result. It is deeper and more significant than a role, and it is what you want your main character to have. If we want to touch the soul of our readers, we must share our own. Character is the map of the nooks and crannies of the heart.

For our purposes, character *always* means this internal map or psychological picture of the person. It is *never* the physical description of a person in your story, though if physical descriptors of any sort help guide you to their internal material, that's certainly useful.

What about all the other roles in your story? Your two main characters need to be well-developed and nuanced because the character of the protagonist and antagonist determines a lot of your story. The characters of the other roles don't serve the story; they serve the main characters. In other words, they can be important, but they are ancillary to the core of your story. When you have a story idea and maybe a few other scenes or elements of your finished product, you need only two roles: Your protagonist, the person we will root for, and the antagonist, the bad guy or person who stands in opposition to the protagonist. These two people will embody the conflicts, both internal and external, that form the core of your writing.

All the other characters, romantic interests, threshold guardians, comic relief, ghosts, mentors, the whole bagful of people you will need later on to tell your story are just distractions now. Put them back on the shelf. Tell them you'll get to them when you need them, and not a moment earlier than that. We can add the love interest and the mean boss later. Don't get sidetracked.

## **HOW TO DEVELOP CHARACTERS**

Like so much of the creative process, it doesn't matter *how* you do it; it matters *what* you wind up with. Many writing teachers will tell students to fill out biographies for their characters: where they live, what schools they go to, what color hair they have. There are plenty of ways to generate characters, including software that will ask you what it believes are the important specific elements of a character. If software helps you find your character, great.

Any process that helps you discover the heart of your character is a good tool. However, please remember that all the externals—like the schools they attend and the color of their hair—can never be the heart of your characters. Those externals are the tools for navigating to the heart of the character, not the character itself. For example, let's say you have a character who went to Harvard. What does that tell us? Smart, probably, but not much else. The follow-up questions might help. Why Harvard? Was she a legacy? That tells you something about how she was brought up and therefore could lead to her assumptions about her life. She went to Harvard but waited tables and ate spaghetti for four years to get by? That's a different character. Wait, she went to City Junior College? Why did she go to a local junior college? If it's because her mother is ill and she has to be around to care for her, that's one character. If it's because she almost failed out of high school because she was dating the local bad boy who is in prison now and she can't get into any other school, then that's a very different character. In each of these examples, the exterior characteristics are useful only to the extent that they lead you to the character's heart.

Disregard people who think a character and a role are the same thing. Your reader is wiser. Your audience doesn't care about the externals, and there is a pile of science to explain why.

### Wonder why?

Check out *Theory of Mind* and also *Mirror Neurons* in Part Two.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

Your story needs a *protagonist* and an *antagonist*.

The protagonist is your lead character, the hero that the audience will follow on the journey that is your story. Your audience needs to root for

the protagonist, so that character must be sympathetic, relatable, and active. Is there one word that encapsulates all these flying adjectives? Yup. Your main character must be *bondable*. Your protagonist must be so relatable to your audience member that they will automatically, non-consciously, identify with the protagonist. That does *not* mean the character has to be nice and sweet. It means the audience member can see a behavior and think, “Wow, I know what that feels like.” This explains why a character with perfect taste and manners may not “get to us,” but a character whom we meet when she is puking from being too drunk last night grabs our heart.

The antagonist is the person or force that stands in constant opposition to the protagonist. She is the bad guy, the evil one, the black hat.

These definitions appear simplistic and wooden. The characters will become more interesting and nuanced as you develop their internal lives and put them into active situations so their behavior expresses dilemmas within your story. In short, they are stiff right now.

They will develop into interesting characters because you will bring them to life. Be patient.

## **HOW TO DEVELOP YOUR PROTAGONIST**

Ask your main character to join you for tea. Really. Or for a chat. Or a walk. When looking for the outlines of the character of our character, we want to know why this particular person wants that particular goal. In our painting hypothetical, does Gracie want the painting because she thinks it’s actually worth a bundle of money? Or does she miss her dead father and it reminds her of how much he loved her? Or did her mother always lust for that painting and if Gracie winds up with it, it is a well-deserved victory for the long-suffering daughter? Obviously, the possibilities are endless, but the choice you make is important. Each one of these choices tells you something different about Gracie’s heart, and therefore much more about the journey she’s beginning.

How do you find your character?

We want to have heart-to-heart talks with our characters, just as you would with a friend. We want to know what's the best thing that happened to her today. What's the worst? Does she have a big laugh? Does she have a bunch of pals or just one or two buddies? What do *they* talk about? What's bothering her today? What's just annoying? Is her house neat or a wreck or just a room she rents with some people she doesn't actually like? What's she afraid of today?

Idea maps are a great way to open the door and allow the character bubbles to get to the surface. It's free play, and that is absolutely the right way to approach it. Giant sheets of paper are a good start. So are colorful pens and markers and dancing music. Put your character's name smack in the middle of an oversized piece of paper and ask her what she loves. And what she hates. Why she wants her painting. What it means to her. Keep going.

Once you get moving on an idea map, some of the spokes will have more energy. Follow that energy, because it's also your enthusiasm.

Another way to find your main character is to talk with her. At the keyboard, write the dialogue you want to have. And let your character answer. It might feel awkward for a few minutes, but if you can withhold judgment, characters often get chatty and will lead you right to the juice. If you have software or macros for writing scripts, use them. Call yourself the writer, and call your character by whatever name she's using.

WRITER

Hey, Gracie. What are you up to?

GRACIE

I'm hanging out waiting for you to ask a good question.  
You got one?

WRITER

Wow. Hostile.

GRACIE

.....!

What does the character say in response? Whatever it is, it tells you something. “Hey, sorry about coming on strong” reveals a different person from “I’ve just been waiting to get the painting; what’s the holdup?” and “I’m not some friggin’ rose on the vine, y’know!” Whatever the comeback is, you’ll know your character a lot better. Keep at it.

If nothing else works, fill out the dreaded biography, remembering that where someone goes to school or lives or what they drive doesn’t matter. Why they made those choices matters a lot.

## **THE PERFECT FIT**

You now have your hero, an imperfect person with emotions. And you have a *problem*, which is the gnarled center of your idea. Why is this particular character the exactly perfect person to face this specific problem? When you can answer this question, you have the skeleton that will be your entire story. It’s simple, but it ain’t easy, as many a wise man has said.

Your protagonist will be someone who is broken in exactly the place where your story will challenge him or her. In a love story, the happy bachelor meets the perfect woman but is unable to commit. Why is he unable to commit? A broken heart from a first love? A mom who loved him so much she will never be equaled? Or a mom who loved him so little that he’s become programmed to reject love?

In *Black Panther*, T’Challa wants to be a good king for his isolated country, but the outside world (in the person of Killmonger) wants

to blow it open. What is the perfect fit for T'Challa? He adores his father and seeks to follow him, but his father's isolation for the country produced the evil that T'Challa now faces. His dedication to his father is in direct conflict with the needs of his people.

In *Spotlight*, the story of the journalists who broke the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church, Robby, the hard-charging journalist, is determined to publicize all the Church's horrible offenses. What is Robby's wound that makes the fit perfect? Robby is a Catholic with a history of giving the Church a pass on its misdeeds. The closer Robby gets to the criminal priests, the closer he gets to the wound of his own subtle complicity. His wound, the complicity, is a perfect fit with a story line of righteous exposure of wrongdoing.

The perfect fit often pits the external goal of the character in direct conflict with a pre-existing emotional or moral wound that is expressed in the *backstory* of your protagonist. Backstory, when used well, is not "what happened before the story begins." Backstory expresses your protagonist's pre-existing emotional condition or the wounds which caused her to be hurtled into this specific story to begin with. Backstory is useful when it reveals what is in the character's heart.

As you write the full story, you will have to decide when to show the reader the backstory or wound. In *Black Panther*, T'Challa's particular wound is disclosed over the first two acts of the film. In *Chinatown*, Faye Dunaway's character finally tells us that "she's my sister *and* my daughter!" late in the film. In *Spotlight*, we discover in the very last scene that Robby has been giving the Church a pass on previous abuse. The choice of when to tell the reader why the obstacle and the character fit each other perfectly is determined by when you as the writer believe that the revelation will have the deepest resonance.

However, you, the writer, must know why your main character and the main obstacle form such a profound challenge before you write a single page. You may not be telling your audience, but you will know

it and write with that shadow, so that when it is fully revealed, the audience will feel the full depth of the dilemma. What you know about the character and what you tell the reader about the character are two separate things.

## **THE ANTAGONIST**

Your *protagonist* needs opposition that personifies the reason why your hero hasn't already achieved her goal. The opposition can be a person, force, institution, even The Empire. This is a force or a person who opposes your hero and will do everything he/she/it can to prevent your hero from achieving the goal.

The *antagonist*, whether a person or a force of nature or whatever else, is what or who your hero is up against. Your antagonist deserves real time and development. He or she must have the resources and the will to be overwhelming. What tools does the antagonist have? Let's consider some examples:

In *Mandela*, the antagonist is the South African government and the laws of apartheid.

In *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, the antagonist is the whole humanoid world, including scientists and our so-called modern technology.

In *The Fugitive*, Gerard, the Tommy Lee Jones character, personifies the relentless determination of US law enforcement.

In *The Untouchables*, the antagonist is the mercilessly violent mob boss, Al Capone.

The smarter/better/more brilliant your antagonist, the better your hero will be forced to be. That is exactly what you want. So, to find your antagonist, the map is pretty straightforward. Given the obstacle you've chosen for your story, who is the one person you can conjure up who can impede the hero in the strongest way? Really? Make the villain stronger! Smarter! More powerful!

Who is the perfect villain in our painting hypothetical? The role of the executor already has a lot of power because in an estate situation, the law is on the executor's side. Who would be the most challenging executor for Gracie? We could consider the relationship the executor has to Gracie. Is he the trust department guy from the bank? A relative who is a lawyer, maybe Uncle Alan? How about a rich relative, like Cousin Jack? Each one gives the story different angles.

The trust guy from the bank would have a lot of authority and the bureaucracy of the bank and the courts on his side, but the role doesn't inherently bring much personal juice. Uncle Alan, the lawyer, will have specialized knowledge of the law, and, to me, a righteous attitude that will grate against Gracie's emotional reason for achieving her goal. What about a relative, a rich aunt or uncle, or a Brother/Cousin/Nephew Jack? A relative brings more raw emotions and attitudes. A brother makes it a sibling rivalry story, and that isn't quite right, I think. A cousin, though, a cousin could work. What could make a cousin more formidable? A guy, I think, because maybe Dad thought Gracie would benefit from a strong, male figure? How about a rich cousin, someone Dad thought would look after Gracie but who is full of himself and out to grab more than just the painting?

What if Dad thought that Cousin Jack would be perfect to help Gracie, so Dad gave him extraordinary powers expecting him to use them for Gracie's benefit, but Jack just wants to take over everything? He's got money and he's got apparent authority from Dad. That's a worthy opponent. I'd use him. Why does Gracie want the painting? Is it because it is valuable? Or because it represents her relationship with her father and she is jealous of sharing him, in whatever manifestation, with anyone? If that's why she wants the painting, then Jack is the perfect antagonist because he covets not just the painting, but its underlying emotional value, the connection with Dad. Jack's an antagonist with an emotional investment, the powers of the will as executor and the

power of plenty of money. He's a great antagonist because he has all the power. Gracie has all the determination. This will be a good fight.