

WEAVING THE CHARACTER WEB

90-Minute Workshop

San Miguel de Allende Writers' Conference

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Types, Archetypes & Human Beings

Take one of the adjectives in the left column and match it with one of the common nouns in the right column (or make up your own such combination). Can you visualize the result? Does that image lend itself to a more complex impression?

JEALOUS	KIDNAPPER
AFFLUENT	GAME WARDEN
LASCIVIOUS	TAXIDERMIST
MANIPULATIVE	BABYSITTER
SANCTIMONIOUS	LIFEGUARD
INSOLENT	BOOKWORM
ARROGANT	CHATTERBOX
SINISTER	POSTMAN
VICIOUS	ACCOUNTANT
SOFT-HEARTED	ASSASSIN
THRIFTY	BARFLY
EXUBERANT	MARINE
OBESE	BALLERINA

Compare to “Characters as Device” from TV Tropes:

Helpful Woodsman, Boy/Girl Next Door, Femme Fatale/Black Widow, Whiz Kid, Absent-Minded Professor, Mad Scientist, Gentleman Thief, Evil Twin, Evil Clown, Dirty Old Man, Recluse/Hermit, Holy Fool, Unholy Fool, Wise Child, Hooker with a Heart of Gold, Warrior Monk, Cannon Fodder (“Dead Meat”), Jailbait, Jewish Mother, Magical Ethnic, Monster-in-Law, Pompous Ass, Snooty Servant, Devoted Domestic.

What this exercise points to is the *power of personification*.

Now compare the foregoing to the 12 Jungian **Archetypes**:

The Innocent
The Orphan
The Protagonist
The Caregiver
The Explorer
The Rebel/Outlaw
The Lover
The Creator
The Joker/Trickster
The Sage
The Magician
The Ruler

Notice any difference? If so, why? If not, why not?

Characters often arise from the story idea. But this can often lead to characters based on other characters, with predictably derivative results.

Characters based on real people:

Near the end of his life, John Updike wrote a poem titled "Peggy Lutz, Fred Muth," in which he thanked his childhood friends and classmates—the beauty and bully, the fatso and others—"for providing a sufficiency of human types . . . all a writer needs." *They keep you honest.*

* * *

The Protagonist

Choose for your Protagonist:

- the character with the most at stake
- the one most compelled to action within the story
- the one that undergoes the most fundamental change
- the one who elicits the most empathy from the reader
- and/or the one who provides the focus for your moral premise (i.e., who demonstrates the right way to live and treat others)

Each of these options underscore that it is the Protagonist's struggles and the conflict she faces that forms the core of the story.

Important: the stakes for the Protagonist must always be ultimate, and that it's the depth of the Protagonist's underlying Yearning that creates those stakes.

There are three primary levels of conflict:

- Internal Questions
- External Struggles
- Interpersonal Relationships

The best stories interweave these three levels of conflict. If the conflict levels are merely parallel, the story will lack unity.

The Opponent

There are several ways to stage the conflict the Protagonist, but the simplest and most direct is to have an Opponent.

The Opponent is the character with the desire, will, and power to destroy, deny, or claim for himself what the Protagonist wants.

This pits the Protagonist and Opponent in a *Unity of Opposites*, where only one can have his fundamental ambition gratified.

The Protagonist's victory is only as great as the conflict he overcomes. Therefore, when the story does have an Opponent, it's important not just to understand but to justify in specific, human terms why the Opponent seeks to oppose the Protagonist so unconditionally.

Justifying the Opponent requires understanding what's at risk for him if the Protagonist prevails—in other words, what are the stakes for the Opponent as well as the Protagonist?

It also requires understanding his values,
And the world and way of life he's defending.

The more you justify the Opponent's actions, the closer you move the conflict to good versus good, the most dramatic form of conflict.

The Unity of Opposites

To dramatize the stakes for the Protagonist effectively you need to put something so formidable between him and what he wants that his success remains in doubt until the very end.

Lajos Egri in *The Art of Dramatic Writing* calls this battle between conflicting, irreconcilable desires or elements the *Unity of Opposites*. Great drama is created when two opposing forces go head to head, with the end result requiring the vanquishing of one or the other. Compromise is not an option.

A story is a moral enterprise. Characters make choices in pursuit of a goal, informed by the kind of person they hope to be, and inspired by a way of life they hope to obtain, preserve, or defend. This is the context of the conflict.

The Protagonist as Vessel of Virtue, or the Myth of the Likable Protagonist

The inclination to confine Protagonists in a prison of virtue is related to the often-heard demand that they be likable. It is far more important that we be able to admire or empathize with a character than that we “like” her—which is just as true of villains as Protagonistes.

For this reason, the more potentially unlikable your character, the more important it is to given him either exceptional skills that inspire admiration, or internal questions and/or an interpersonal relationship that reveals a deeper need, wound, or longing.

- Blanche Dubois, one of the greatest characters in American drama, is petty, dishonest, manipulative, sexually perverse and an alcoholic, which is what makes her relentless ferocity so compelling.
- Yossarian in *Catch-22* exhibits none of the physical courage and valor we associate with the warrior in the Galahad tradition, but he’s no coward; he’s grimly dogged in his desire to survive: "He had decided to live forever or die in the attempt."
- Clarice Starling in *Silence of the Lambs* embodies law-enforcement rectitude and small-town good manners, but Hannibal Lecter sniffs out her cunning ambition.

The Character Web: Secondary Characters

Types versus roles — Tropes versus Dramatic Function

Secondary characters allow you to reveal both conscious and unconscious aspects of the main characters’ psychological, moral, and emotional makeup.

People form unusual alliances under duress. Which of your characters might be drawn closer together in tough times? Why? What conditions or circumstances might blow them apart?

The following roles are *not* mutually exclusive. There may be more than one character playing each role.

Ghost

Revenant

Counterweight character

Crucial ally

False ally/betrayer

Visitor/Stranger/Outsider

The Village

Four-Corner Conflict

The Protagonist should face opposition from more than one direction. Though his principal source of conflict will be the Opponent, secondary characters can also oppose him in different ways. This helps create moral complexity and provides opportunities for reversals and reveals.

Opponent: key adversary.

Revenant: Forces the Protagonist to deal with his inner issues; often a love interest.

Secondary Opponent/Competitor: Presents some other opposition.

Ideally, each of these characters also have conflicts with each other.

