

SCREEN TALES

A four-week workshop on the art and craft of storytelling for screen



SESSION 3 – CHARACTER ON SCREEN

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What is character and why are characters important to story?
What are the different types of character and what are the roles they play?

‘Screenwriters need to let every character be human, to let the best and worst of them challenge something within us to resonate with sympathy. Writers should see to it that their characters’ imperfections cause us to celebrate and expand our human tolerance.

If action defines character, the character defines action. To determine what action a character should take and in what setting, the writer should study the character.

Richard Walter
Screenwriting

‘Characters are not human beings. A character is no more a human being than the Venus de Milo is a real woman. A character is a work of art, a metaphor for human nature.

TRUE CHARACTER is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure – the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation, the truer the choice to the character’s essential nature...the only way we ever come to know characters in depth is through their choices under pressure.

Structure and character are interlocked. The event structure of a story is created out of the choices that characters make under pressure and the actions they choose to take, while characters are the creatures who are revealed and changed by how they choose to act under pressure.’

Robert McKee
Story

‘A weak character cannot carry the burden of protracted conflict in a play.’

Lajos Egri
The Art of Dramatic Writing

‘Character is that which reveals personal choice.’

Aristotle
Poetics

ACTIVITY 1 – YOUR CHARACTER

A woman is taking her dog, a miniature Poodle, for a walk through a park. As she does so a man approaches her – also walking a dog, a Rottweiler.

As she draws close – the Rottweiler spots her dog and begins to growl – lunging against its lead before breaking away and racing towards the woman and her tiny dog.

Create your CHARACTER – what does the woman do next?

THE PROTAGONIST

‘A PROTAGONIST is a wilful character. The protagonist has a conscious desire.

The protagonist must be empathetic; he may or may not be sympathetic. Deep within the protagonist the audience recognises a certain shared humanity. In that moment of recognition, the audience suddenly and instinctively wants the protagonist to achieve whatever it is that he desires.

Here’s a simple test to apply to any story. Ask: What is the risk? What does the protagonist stand to lose if he does not get what he wants? More specifically, what’s the worst thing that will happen to the protagonist if he does not achieve his desire? If the answer is: ‘Should the protagonist fail, life would go back to normal,’ this story is not worth telling.’

Robert McKee
Story

‘The pivotal character is the protagonist. Without a pivotal character there is no play. The pivotal character is the one who creates conflict and makes the play move forward. The pivotal character knows what he wants. Without him the story flounders . . . in fact, there is no story.

There must always be something a person wants more than anything else in life if he is to be a good pivotal character; revenge, honor, ambition, etc.

Lajos Egri
The Art of Dramatic Writing

CHARACTER GROWTH

‘Taking the principle further yet; the finest writing not only reveals true character, but arcs or changes that inner nature, for better or worse, over the course of the telling.’

Robert McKee
Screenwriting

‘The absence of growth signals the lack of conflict; and the lack of conflict indicates that your characters were not well orchestrated.’

Lajos Egri
The Art of Dramatic Writing

ACTIVITY 1 – MEET THE PROTAGONIST

Using the three examples you have brought with you – detail below the title of the three films – and the PROTAGONIST/S that drives each film. Describe also conscious DESIRE of each PROTAGONIST.

1. Film title:

Protagonist:

Desire:

2. Film title:

Protagonist:

Desire:

3. Film title:

Protagonist:

Desire:

ARCHETYPES

What are ARCHETYPES and what function do they serve in storytelling?

'Carl G. Jung wrote about archetypes; constantly repeating characters or energies which occur in the dreams of all people and the myths of all cultures. Jung suggested that these archetypes reflect different aspects of the human mind – that our personalities divide themselves into these characters to play out the drama of our lives. He noticed a strong correspondence between his patients' dream figures and the common archetypes of mythology. He suggested that both were coming from a deeper source, in the collective unconscious of the human race.

The concept of archetypes is an indispensable tool for understanding the purpose or function of characters in a story.

Looking at archetypes as flexible character functions rather than rigid character types, can liberate your storytelling. The archetypes can be thought of as masks, worn by characters temporarily as they are needed to advance the story.

Two questions are helpful for a writer trying to identify the nature of an archetype:

- 1) What psychological function or part of the personality does it represent?

- 2) What is its dramatic function in a story?'

Christopher Vogler
The Writer's Journey

HERO

‘The word hero is Greek, from a root that means ‘to protect and to serve. The dramatic purpose of the Hero is to give the audience a window into the story. Storytellers do this by giving their Heroes a combination of qualities, a mix of universal and unique characteristics.

A well-rounded Hero can be determined, uncertain, charming, forgetful, impatient, and strong in body but weak at heart, all at the same time. It’s the particular combination of qualities that gives an audience the sense that the Hero is one of a kind, a real person than a type.

Another function of the Hero is learning or growth. Heroes overcome obstacles and achieve goals, but they also gain new knowledge and wisdom. The Hero is usually the most active person in the script. His will and desire is what drives most stories forward.

People commonly think of Heroes as strong or brave, but these qualities are secondary to sacrifice – the true mark of a Hero. Sacrifice is the Hero’s willingness to give up something of value, perhaps even her own life, on behalf of an ideal or a group.

Heroes show us how to deal with death. They may survive it, proving that death is not so tough. They may die (perhaps only symbolically) and be reborn, proving that death can be transcended.’

MENTOR: WISE OLD MAN OR WOMAN

‘An archetype found frequently in dreams, myths, and stories is the Mentor, usually a positive figure who aids or trains the hero. This archetype is expressed in all those characters who teach and protect heroes and give them gifts.

Mentors represent the Self, the god within us, the aspect of personality that is connected with all things. Mentor figures stand for the hero’s highest aspirations. Mentors are often former heroes who have survived life’s early trials and are now passing on the gift of their knowledge and wisdom.

Teaching or training is a key function of the Mentor. Giving gifts is also an important function of this archetype.

Another important function of the Mentor archetype is to motivate the hero and help her overcome fear.’

Christopher Vogler
The Writer’s Journey

THRESHOLD GUARDIAN

'Threshold Guardians are usually not the main villains or antagonists in stories. Often, they will be lieutenants of the villain, lesser thugs or mercenaries hired to guard access to the chief's headquarters. They may also be neutral figures. In rare cases they may be secret helpers placed in the hero's path to test her willingness and skill.

Testing of the hero is the primary dramatic function of the Threshold Guardian.

Successful heroes learn to recognise Threshold Guardians not as threatening enemies, but as useful allies. Threshold Guardians who appear to be attacking may in fact be doing the hero a huge favour. Ideally, Threshold Guardians are not to be defeated but incorporated. Heroes learn the Guardians' tricks, absorb them, and go on.

The energy of the Threshold Guardian may not be embodied as a character, but may be found as a prop, architectural feature, animal, or force of nature that blocks and tests the hero. Learning how to deal with the Threshold Guardian is one of the major tests of the Hero's Journey.'

HERALD

Heralds provide motivation, offer the hero a challenge, and get the story rolling.

Typically, in the opening phase of a story, heroes have 'gotten by' somehow. They have handled an imbalanced life through a series of defences or coping mechanisms. Then all at once some new energy enters the story that makes it impossible for the hero to simply get by any longer. A new person, condition, or information shifts the hero's balance, and nothing will ever be the same. A decision must be made, action taken, the conflict faced. The Herald may be a person or a force.

Often the Herald is simply a means of bringing news to the hero of a new energy that will change the balance. It could be a telegram or a phone call.

SHAPESHIFTER

‘An important psychological purpose of the Shapeshifter archetype is to express the energy of the animus and anima, terms from the psychology of Carl Jung. The animus is Jung’s name for the male element in the female unconscious, the bundle of positive and negative images of masculinity in a woman’s dreams and fantasies. The anima is the corresponding female element in the male unconscious.

The Shapeshifter serves the dramatic function of bringing doubt and suspense into a story. When heroes keep asking, “Is he faithful to me? Is he going to betray me? Is he an ally or an enemy?” a Shapeshifter is generally present.’

SHADOW

‘The archetype of the Shadow represents the energy of the dark side, the unexpressed, unrealised, or rejected aspects of something.

The function of the Shadow is to challenge the hero and give her a worthy opponent in the struggle. Shadows create conflict and bring out the best in a hero by putting her in a life-threatening situation.

Shadows need not be totally evil or wicked. In fact, it’s better if they are humanized by a touch of goodness, or by some admirable quality.

A Shadow may be a character or force external to the hero, or it may be a deeply repressed part of the hero.’

TRICKSTER

‘Tricksters cut big egos down to size and bring heroes and audiences down to earth. Above all, they bring about healthy change and transformation. They are the natural enemy of the status quo.

In drama, Tricksters serve all these psychological functions, plus the dramatic function of comic relief. Unrelieved tension, suspense, and conflict can be emotionally exhausting, and in even the heaviest drama and audience’s interest is revived by moments of laughter.

Tricksters may be servants or Allies working for the hero or Shadow, or they may be independent agents with their own skewed agenda.’

Christopher Vogler
The Writer’s Journey

SCREEN TALES – CHARACTER ON SCREEN

'You don't have to be Joseph Campbell to see that no matter who's hot in Casting Call, the archetypes never change. Each one of these archetypes has a story arc we want to see played out again and again. The stories of these heroes and the mathematical equations that makes their stories work is already sewn into our DNA.'

Blake Snyder
Save the Cat

ACTIVITY 2 – WHO'S YOUR TYPE?

Using the three examples you have brought with you – detail below the title of the three films – and a character name and corresponding ARCHETYPE you can identify from each story.

1. Film title:
Character:
Archetype:

2. Film title:
Character:
Archetype:

3. Film title:
Character:
Archetype: