

Block 2 Character, setting and genre

5 Fiction Writer's Workshop

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Character

Most people read fiction not so much for plot as for company. In a good piece of fiction you can meet someone and get to know her in depth, or you can meet yourself, in disguise, and imaginatively live out and understand your passions. The writer William Sloan thinks it boils down to this: "Tell me about me. I want to be more alive. Give me me."

If character matters so much to the reader, it matters even more to the writer. Once you create convincing characters, everything else should easily follow. F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "Character is plot, plot is character." But, as fiction writer and teacher Peter LaSalle has noted, out of character, plot easily grows, but out of plot, a character does not necessarily follow. To show what makes a character, you must come to a crucial choice that almost breaks and then makes the character. The make-or-break decision gives you plot. Think of Saul on the way to Damascus: While persecuting Christians, he is blinded by a vision; after that, he changes, becomes St. Paul, the greatest proselyte. Something stays the same, however; he is equally zealous, before and after. No matter what you think of the story of Paul's conversion, keep it in mind as a paradigm for making a character.

Of course, not all characters undergo a crucial change. With some characters, their unchangeability and constancy makes a story. In "Rust," my story about the sculptor-turned-tombstone-maker, everything (the country, family, town) changes, except the character. Even his body collapses, but his spirit stays bellicose and steadfast. Here he is, at work:

He refused to answer any more of my questions. His hands – with thick cracked skin and purple nails from hammer misses – picked up a hammer. Veins twisted around his stringy tendons so that his tendons looked like the emblem for medicine. He hit the broadened head of the chisel, bluish steel cutting into gray stone, dust flying up in a sneezing cloud. With his gray hair and blue stubbly cheeks he blended into the grain of the stone – a stone with a pair of horned eyebrows. Chiseling into the stone, he wrestled with time, to mark and catch it. But time evaded him like a canny boxer. Letting him cut into rocks, the bones of the earth, Time would let him exhaust himself.

Seven years later I saw him. His face sunken. His body had grown weaker. Time had chiseled into his face so steadily that you could tell how many years had passed just by looking at the grooves cutting across his forehead. But the stubbornness in his eyes had grown stronger. They were larger, and although ringed with milky-gray cataracts, glaringly fierce.

Whether or not there's a change in you, character is not the part of you that conforms, but rather, that sticks out. So a caricaturist seeks out oddities in a face; big jaws, slanted foreheads, strong creases. The part of the character that does not conform builds a conflict, and the conflict makes the story. Find something conflicting in a character, some trait sticking out of the plane, creating dimension and complexity. Make the conflict all-consuming, so that your character fights for life. Stanley Elkin, author of *The Dick Gibson Show*, emphasized the need for struggle this way: "I would never write about someone who is not at the end of his rope."

Think of the basic character conflicts in successful stories. "The Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant: Mme. Loisel, unreconciled to her lower-class standing, strives to appear upper class, at all costs. Out of that internal conflict ensues the tragedy of her working most of her adult life to pay for a fake necklace.

"The Girls in Their Summer Dresses" by Irwin Shaw: Though married and in love with his wife, a young man is still attracted to other women.

In Henry James' "The Beast in the Jungle": John Marcher waits for some extraordinary passion to take hold of him; he dreams of it so much that he does not notice he is in love with May Bertram, who is at his side all along. Only when she dies, of neglect, does he realize it.

In "The Blue Hotel" by Stephen Crane: The Swede, visiting a small town in rural Nebraska, imagines that he is in the wild West and consequently sets himself against a bar of ordinary people whom he imagines as gamblers and murderers.

In all these stories, characters suffer from a conflicting flaw. Aristotle called these character flaws *hamartia* – usually interpreted as "tragic flaw" (most often hubris or arrogance) when we talk about tragedies. Sometimes, however, a flaw may not lead to disaster, but to a struggle with a subsequent enlightenment. (St. Paul's zeal, for example, leads him to an epiphany.)

A flaw could result also from an excessive virtue. Look at the opening of *Michael Kohlhaas* by the early nineteenth-century German writer Heinrich von Kleist:

Michael Kohlhaas ... owned a farm on which he quietly earned a living by his trade; his children were brought up in the fear of God to be industrious and honest; there was not one of his neighbors who had not benefited from his goodness and fair-mindedness – the world would have had every reason to bless his memory, if he had not carried one virtue to excess. But his sense of justice turned him into a robber and a murderer.

Since his horses were abused at a border crossing between two principalities, and he could not get a just compensation in courts, Kohlhaas takes justice into his hands and burns down the castle where the horses suffered. In addition, he burns the city of Dresden, which protected the offenders. His sense of justice provokes a war. His uncompromising virtue may amount to vice – certainly it's a flaw, the plot-generating flaw.