Section 4

Character

Although plot is a critical component in fiction, it is the characters that most often stay with us and are what we remember most. Characters are the invented populace of the story, adding voice, purpose, and meaning to the plot. Essentially, it is through their actions and reactions that the plot unfolds.

There are two types of characters, major and minor. A major character is the important figure at the center of the action. The major character is almost always dynamic; he or she changes in some way throughout the course of the story. The minor characters support the major character by highlighting, aggravating, or accentuating the conflict. Minor characters are almost always static; they change little through the course of the story.

Creating Characters

Fictional characters should have some complexity. They cannot be flat, operating on a single plane. They need to be round, or complex, crossing back and forth between multiple planes, which is a very human characteristic. For example, a character with a paralyzing shyness may be driven to
perform on stage. Or a character, suffering from loss, may feel compelled to find love again.

**Depth and dimension can breathe life into characters, making them memorable to the reader.**

A character can be deepened in many ways. Some effective methods are to add elements of interest, such as physical traits, mannerisms, flaws, passions, world views, and internal conflicts.

"I had to distinguish 15 different voices. I had to give each one of those voices different little characteristics, little nuances...."

- Ernest J. Gaines

Following are illustrations of these elements using Joyce Carol Oates’s short story *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?* The complete text of this story is available on *Celestial Timepiece*, an authorized Joyce Carol Oates website.

Physical traits can speak volumes about a character. Does he have calloused hands or soft, tender hands? Are her fingers long and delicate or stubby and meaty? Does the character speak with a slow, Southern drawl or with a clipped, impatient cadence? The small physical details of a character can help establish personality,

"... once you believe in the characters, the book tends to become more realistic..."

- Norman Mailer
motivation, and history.
In *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*, Connie’s hair and dress reveal her need for attention.

> “Connie had long dark blonde hair that drew anyone’s eye to it, and she wore part of it pulled up on her head and puffed out and the rest of it she let fall down her back. She wore a pull-over jersey blouse that looked one way when she was home and another way when she was away from home.”

In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Ernest J. Gaines created characters inspired by his life in Louisiana.

Because there were 15 characters, each needed a distinctive voice to help distinguish one character from another. Gaines stitched together dialects and elements of speech gathered from the different people he had known throughout the State of Louisiana. Adding this physical trait helps the reader keep track of each individual character.

Mannerisms can add dimension to a character while also revealing something more about the character’s personality: a nervous twitch, a repetitive fidget, or a knuckle crack. These recurring mannerisms add reliability and help establish a character’s habits and state of mind, eliminating the need to overtly explain to the reader information about the character.

In *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*, Connie’s mannerisms inform the reader about her personality.

> “Her name was Connie. She was fifteen and she had a quick, nervous giggling habit of craning her neck to glance into mirrors or checking other people’s faces to make sure her own was all right.”

Flaws are a part of human nature. If a character exists without flaws, that character is not believable. Flaws such as over-confidence, under-confidence, vanity, pessimism, or over-optimism could incorporate a tragic element to a character that adds further dimension and sympathy.
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Icarus... Give 30 second mythology write-up about Icarus, view picture online and read Alden Nowlan’s poem...
In *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*, Connie’s flaw is vanity.

“Connie would raise her eyebrows at these familiar old complaints and look right through her mother, into a shadowy vision of herself as she was right at that moment: she knew she was pretty and that was everything.”

Often there is something the main character wants that is out of reach for any number of reasons, and it becomes a driving passion. Without passion, a character remains flat and lacks complexity. A father who has pushed his son into the military and then lost him in a war may feel a passionate need to make a connection with his son’s family, despite their reluctance. A woman with a passionate need to connect with her distant, runaway daughter is led down a path filled with drugs and back alley danger.

In *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*, Connie’s passion is her need to feel mature and gain the attention of the opposite sex.

“Connie sat with her eyes closed in the sun, dreaming and dazed with the warmth about her as if this were a kind of love, the caresses of love, and her mind slipped over onto thoughts of the boy she had been with the night before and how nice he had been, how sweet it always was, not the way someone like June would suppose but sweet, gentle, the way it was in movies and promised in songs.”

A character’s world view is something that a writer needs to understand in order to predict how the character will react to adversity. How do characters perceive the world that they live in? How do they feel the world perceives them? These ideas will influence the decisions that the characters make and can help direct action and complications. A man from a small town and his estranged, agoraphobic sister must meet up in Manhattan in search of their birth parents. The actions of this unlikely pair will be largely influenced by their world's views.
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**PASSIONS**

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The way a character feels about the world will affect how they react to complications and events.

Katniss’s way of looking at the world... order to predict how the character will react to adversity. How do characters perceive the world that they live in? How do they feel the world perceives them? These ideas will influence the decisions that the characters make and can help direct action and complications. A man from a small town and his estranged, agoraphobic sister must meet up in Manhattan in search of their birth parents. The actions of this unlikely pair will be largely influenced by their worlds views.
In *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*, Connie’s worldview reflects her belief that she is special, preferred, because of her beauty.

“If June’s name was mentioned her mother’s tone was approving, and if Connie’s name was mentioned it was disapproving. This did not really mean she disliked Connie, and actually Connie thought that her mother preferred her to June just because she was prettier, but the two of them kept up a pretense of exasperation, a sense that they were tugging and struggling over something of little value to either of them.”

The internal conflict of a character is the culmination of passion, flaws, worldview, and external influences. This can be the most interesting component to read about. Complex characters will struggle between what they need and what they want. The actions the character takes will be based on resolving that internal conflict.

In *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been*, the internal conflict is marked by Connie’s struggle between wanting to be an adult and accepting the sacrifice that goes along with making adult decisions.

“She turned and bumped against a chair or something, hurting her leg, but she ran into the back room and picked up the telephone. Something roared in her ear, a tiny roaring, and she was so sick with fear that she could do nothing but listen to it—the telephone was clammy and very heavy and her fingers groped down to the dial but were too weak to touch it. She began to scream into the phone, into the roaring. She cried out, she cried for her mother, she felt her breath start jerking back and forth in her lungs as if it were something Arnold Friend was stabbing her with again and again with no tenderness. A noisy sorrowful wailing rose all about her and she was locked inside it the way she was locked inside this house.”
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“*If June’s name was mentioned her mother’s tone was approving, and if Connie’s name was mentioned it was disapproving. This did not really mean she disliked Connie, and actually Connie thought that her mother preferred her to June, just because she was a girl. June was a pre-teen. They were perfectly great, they were something.*

This also develops theme. What they need/want is a values struggle. What they decide tells a lot about theme.

**INTERNAL CONFLICT**

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Use this sheet to understand characters in any story you are reading. Fill out as many of the sections as you can for the main character.

A second use for the sheet is to fill this out for the characters in your stories. It will help you understand them and their motivations.