

CHAPTER FIVE: CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCTION

Memorable stories always have memorable characters. These figures are complex and display a number of traits that reflect the character's humanity. They are much more than the sum of physical attributes because the authors have delved deeply into the inner workings of their nature.

These types of characters contain a myriad of facets, both the physical, external ones and the nonphysical, internal ones. The facial features are an obvious physical aspect. Dress habit is another. In my opinion, these external facets are not as important as the internal ones. These internal aspects of the characters are the ones that grab the reader's attention because they turn the characters into unique human beings. In addition, these internal facets dictate how a character will react to various stimuli in the story. If these reactions aren't consistent with the character's inner traits, the character will be viewed by the reader as a phony. As a consequence, these internal aspects are the ones that consume most of my time when I am developing a new character for a story.

CHARACTER BACKGROUND

A writer must develop the background of her character in order to understand what makes the character tick. This understanding is essential to develop the correct responses to story situations. For instance, a character who dropped out of high school will be unbelievable if he uses quantum mechanics to explain how the aliens transported money out of a locked bank vault and a sickly protagonist can't use physical violence to subjugate the muscle-bound antagonist. However, a character raised in France can use French words and phrases without sounding snobbish to the reader.

How much background is required? This is open question. I use about a half page of background to define a major character in a short story and a paragraph or two for a minor character. As a rule of thumb, the more important the character is to your story, the more background you require. Naturally, a major character in a novel needs a lot more background than that if the character is in a short story.

The deeper you plan to probe into the character's psyche during the story, the more detail you need about the character's mental composition. Conversely, the more you know about the character's mental makeup, the easier it is for your story to probe deep into the character's psyche.

PHILOSOPHICAL OUTLOOK

An important nonphysical feature of my characters is their philosophical outlook. This attribute also influences the way the character thinks and defines the character's reaction to some story stimuli. This element is one of the first that I give to my new character since it influences other aspects. For instance, a reader will not believe in a cheerful character who is supposed to be a pessimist. Similarly, a morose character will make a poor (i.e. unbelievable) optimist.

Besides pessimism (reality is evil) and optimism (reality is good), I use a number of other philosophies for my characters. These include individualism (personal freedom and autonomy), materialism (reality consists of matter only), mysticism (reliance on and belief in creeds or faiths), nihilism (social and economic order is corrupt), and pragmatism (emphasizes consequences and practical results of one's actions). Definitions of all of these can be found in number of books including dictionaries. You will find a list of many of these philosophies along with their definitions later in this chapter.

In building a group of characters for a story, I ensure that the characters have a variety of philosophies. A lot of conflict and humor can be achieved by giving the protagonist and the sidekick conflicting philosophies such as pessimism and optimism or mysticism and

materialism. This last pair pits a character with a strong belief in faith against another who doesn't believe that faith has anything to do with events or results.