

Transcript | The Function of Character

When it comes to considering writing style, as you have done in the last section, writers, and readers, might associate particular writing styles with particular stories. Crime fiction, for example, might include a great deal of authorial assistance (in the form of adverbs, commonly used description and well-trodden tropes) so that each time you sit down to a crime fiction novel, the experience feels familiar. The focus, to some extent, is on the rise and fall of the story, not the quality of the sentences. We rely on very familiar story patterns when writing fiction; a murder mystery will start with a body and end with the case solved, a romantic comedy will start with a middle-of-the-road type character who will have to overcome a few obstacles before their happy ending arrives; a quest will follow characters on a journey of discovery and challenge that will lead them to an ending that opens to a brighter future. For each, recognisable story shape, readers are used to similar types of character. Think of the types of characters you might come across in a romantic comedy and compare them to the types of characters that are common in fantasy.

All of this is to say that, when we read writing that seems to be *aware* of the act of writing, we wouldn't be wrong in concluding that the plot is not as thrilling and spilling. Often, a distinction is made between the plot focus in popular fiction and the character focus in literary fiction. Not true, I hear you say. Who doesn't consider Daenerys from R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* to be a complex, intriguing character? And what about our favourite wizard, Harry Potter? Or clumsy, 90's heroine Bridget Jones? And don't forget dear old James Bond. These are famous characters—and characters that go beyond the words on the page—yet are they relatable. But they are, it's true to say, consistently put in situations where they have to run with the plot from A to B. Literary characters make their own plot. A better way of putting this is that literary characters *drive* the plot.

In his beautifully, illustrated on-writing guide *Wonderbook*, Jeff VanDerMeer makes a distinction between 'flat', 'rounded' and 'partial' characters.

He says, 'Full characterisation dips into the interiority of the characters, and it often gives the reader a character's thoughts, feelings, personal history, and relationships in a way that conveys a "three-dimensional" sense of person.'¹

¹ VanderMeer, Jeff. *Wonderbook: The Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction* (New York: Abrahms, 2013), p. 181.

With this in mind, could we really consider James Bond to be a full character? Yes, he is an international man of mystery, so it is perhaps unfair to expect him to reveal too much about himself, but, it must be said, that he certainly seems to be more ‘type driven’ than his ‘rounded’ counterparts. Of partial, type-driven characters, VanderMeer says, ‘In some kinds of stories featuring partial characterization, unique individuality may be absent and instead types are evoked—the plucky airline stewardess, the gruff police detective—to flesh out characterisation.’ He goes on to say: ‘The character will most definitely exert power and influence. However, the writer has more freedom to manipulate the character along a path because fewer character details and thoughts have been given to the reader that would make the reader feel that *this specific person* would not take this action.’²

‘Flat’ characterisation, although seemingly of less creative value, features in our most loved and remembered stories. What would the story of Cinderella be, for example, without Prince Charming? How would we understand the tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*, without the Little Red Riding Hood herself? VanderMeer says: ‘Folktales and fairy tales, along with their modern variants, rarely feature rounded characters. Folktales are by design highly efficient storytelling engines, packed full of plot.’³ Do you know, for example, Prince Charming’s backstory? What was it like for him, growing up in the palace? What kind of pressure does he feel at the prospect of ‘choosing’ a wife? And Little Red Riding Hood, how does she react when she is frightened? Does she tremble? Does she run until her calves ache? Given that she is put in quite a scary situation with a wolf, alone in the woods, we really have no idea how fear makes her react, physically or mentally. Her sole function is to drive the story.

If we return to our original points on style, you must first decide what kind of fiction you want to write; fiction that is story driven or fiction that is character driven? Either way, it is a truth generally acknowledged that characterisation is the most important element of writing fiction. If your reader is invested in your character, then they will be invested in the story. With this in mind, I advise you to aim for a ‘full character’ approach, even if you decide that you want to write a story that is led by plot. You may well find that a certain ‘type’ of character suits that plot (the grumpy detective, the wide-eyed explorer) but you can still make your character empathetic, interesting and relatable.

² Ibid., 182.

³ Ibid.

The next section of this course will encourage you to think about the psychological basis of characterisation. You will see that the chapter provided from *The Science of Storytelling* looks at an example of a partial character I have already mentioned in this section, James Bond. This shows that even plot driven narratives use characters that require groundwork before letting them loose on the page.

We will look at how to develop your character in the following sections, but first of all, respond to the question prompts in this section below. Thinking about characters in more depth will allow you to reflect upon your own writing, especially when it comes to deciding who are your favourite characters from film/fiction and what about them, specifically, appeals to you? Which characters do you dislike and why do you dislike them?

Refer to the next step for more information on your task for this section.