
THE CHARACTERIZATION TRIANGLE

by Connie Flynn

STEREOTYPE: Characters in popular fiction become vivid to the degree the reader relates to who they are. Stereotypes cause crisp images in readers' minds. The trick is to start with the stereotype, then add differentiating traits that make the character an individual.

1. Start with a stereotype such as profession, place of birth, social background, personal interest or an unusual personality trait. Examples: Cop, New Yorker, trailer park kid, bird watcher, hyperactive — the possibilities are endless.
 2. Refine the stereotype to bring it into focus. Examples: Hotheaded cop, upstate New Yorker, vacation time RV park, watches birds of prey, poetry in motion — the possibilities go beyond endless.
 3. Begin character points with a refined stereotype in mind.
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Character Points:

Primary
Characteristic



Fatal
Flaw

Shadow

1. Primary Mode — Defines how the character operates. It's the trait which she normally displays, such as warm, caretaker, reserved, logical, warrior, outgoing, leader, etc. Think snappy, descriptive nouns or adjectives. This is an admirable trait and it makes the character distinctive and likeable to your audience (or in case of the villain, despicable). It is the most visible part of the personality, both in life and in stories.
2. Fatal Flaw — This trait brings the protagonist down, and is the villain's strength. In all cases, the fatal flaw is a positive trait carried to extreme (thrifty vs. miserly; courageous vs. reckless, protective vs. overbearing). The character is blind to this trait or considers it a virtue. Stories revolve around how the character deals with the fatal flaw.
3. Shadow — A secret yearning. The protagonist actively suppresses this trait or is unaware he has it, or believes it's a quality he lacks. Mostly it is invisible to the character and to the world. It is **not** an evil trait as is commonly supposed. It is suppressed because it doesn't harmonize well with the other three traits. Generally the shadow is in direct opposition to the primary characteristic and fatal flaw. The individual believes that allowing it to emerge would destroy the integrity of the personality while, in truth, this is the trait that completes the personality and allows the character to defeat the fatal flaw.

Example: An ambitious person squashes a yearning to be laid back and carefree. Her triangle is that she's an achiever, her fatal flaw is that she's single minded and her shadow is a desire to be more easygoing. As the story starts, her [insert a profession] career is going gang-busters. She's working 80 hours a week, getting long desired recognition. She's also getting an ulcer along with it. Plus, her teenaged daughter has been breaking curfew. Or so her husband says (how would she know? she works all the time) and he's been having a guilty flirtation with the lady who runs the coffee shop in his office building that he knows he should confess (but how can he? his wife works all the time).

These situations occur almost predictably, considering what's driving this woman. With them, you can extrapolate a variety of stories. Daughter gets caught in a raid at a wild party that she ended up at by mistake. Dad rescues her. As they drive home, they strike an agreement not to tell Mom, she's already overwhelmed, and get in an auto accident. Or daughter attends a wild drug party, not knowing what she's getting into. She tries to leave, but the party is busted by Russian white slave traders who are looking for girls to export home. Daughter calls Dad, but he's too busy with the coffee shop lady and Mom is meeting with important clients at an unknown location.

Build your triangles well for each character and ask yourself the most logical consequences of their behaviors. In this case an unsupervised teenager and a potentially straying husband. Leave out your value judgments as you do these exercises. If you want readers to have sympathy with your characters, you must sympathize with them also. And how do you do that? By building a background that would as inevitably produce a person who would have your character's fatal flaw. And by creating challenges that push on that fatal flaw until the character faces it and gives it up.

Obviously there is more to great characterization than the triangle traits. Characters must also have supporting traits and backgrounds. The thing to remember is that in a mentally healthy person, the traits and background harmonize and support the primary mode. If they lightly clash, your character will be neurotic. If they strongly clash, your character will be psychotic (keep this in mind when crafting villains)

The shadow always contrasts with the fatal flaw. You draw on the shadow trait to transform the character's fatal flaw. The protagonist's struggle creates character growth and surrendering the flaw is the sacrifice that wins the ultimate prize. The shadow is the key to growth and sacrifice because it gives the character the strength to do the right thing.

Combining Character and Plot:

To intertwine character and story, do this:

1. Use the triangle to build your character.
2. Devise an introductory scene *showing* the character acting out his stereotype and primary characteristic. Give the character a problem to solve that sets up the story. Plug this into a plot worksheet as the inciting incident.
3. Allow the shadow side to emerge gradually. At first rejected, then eventually accepted. Devise scenes that *show* this internal conflict and plug into a plot worksheet as supporting incidents.

4. Begin revealing the shadow and give character glimpses of how the flaw adversely affects her life. Each consequence gives more evidence and eventually character is forced to face the truth. This brings about the turnaround scene, which is triggered by one final event. The shadow emerges, softens the flaw and allows the decision that brings about the climax. Plug these scenes into the final conflict section.
5. Create the climax scene tying it into character growth. Plug that into the climax section.
6. Reveal the results of the character growth in the denouement.

Conflict Points:

1. Create points for the second protagonist/antagonist and/or villain. Keep the following principles in mind:
 - a. Conflict is intensified to the degree that the characters' primary characteristic, supporting trait and fatal flaw are in direct opposition, making relationships an exercise in compromise and adaptation.
 - b. Resolution occurs when the characters' shadow needs are drawn out by the other character.
 - c. Antagonists are characters whose goals oppose the protagonist's goals, but they aren't necessarily bad people.
 - d. Villains are characters with destructive intentions. Their fatal flaw often supports them in the beginning, but eventually combines with the shadow to bring them down. To make well-rounded villains, give them an admirable supporting trait and a sympathetic shadow.
2. Compare the points with the protagonist's points and look for contrast between the two. Intensify as much as possible.
3. Complete a separate plot worksheet for each major character. Compare them to that of the main protagonist. Look for ways to combine scenes, then plug the results into a separate plot worksheet to use as a story guideline.

There are many tools for character and plot development. This is one that may be of use to kick-start a plot or shore up an ailing storyline, but it can easily be combined with other methods. Be as creative with your use of this tool as you are in your writing.

*This material was inspired by the work of script consultant/teacher, David Freeman.
Visit www2.beyondstructure.com/start.php for more information.*