What's in a Name? Instant Character Development   14-Feb-11 to 26-Feb-11

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What's in a Name? Instant Character Development

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We hope you found your workshop both educational and fun and we hope to see you again soon.

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Introduction: Welcome to Class!

Welcome to What's In A Name – Instant Character Development, I'm your instructor, Theresa Meyers.

Some of you may have taken classes with me before, if so, welcome back! For those of you who aren't familiar with me I'm a multi-published romance author who writes paranormal category romance for Harlequin, steampunk for Kensington and historical romances for Diversion Books as well as a former magazine and newspaper journalist. My latest book, *The Truth About Vampires*, is actually going to be on shelves starting tomorrow. I also happen to be a former book publicist and owned Blue Moon Communications which got two authors selected for the Kelly Ripa Book Club. So I know a little bit about this industry from a lot of different angles.

For the next two weeks we're going to be covering an element of writing that you can't do without: your characters. They are the foundation of all great fiction. For many writers getting started with their story takes awhile because it may be one, two or even three chapters before they really understand who their characters are, what they want and why they can't have it. Some writers pull very detailed character profiles together before every writing a page. But what we're going to be covering in this class is a method for fleshing out your characters into three-dimensional people that's fast, effective and can get you moving on to the writing, as quickly as possible. After all, editors don't buy your character sketches, they buy a finished book!

By the end of class you'll have been given the tools to make a sketch of your entire character just from the name. You'll learn how to deepen characters with a few simple tools, locate your character's goal, motivation and conflict with a few simple questions and discover how you can create a more powerful plot from your character.

I'll be posting lectures on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Tuesdays and Thursdays are for homework and discussions.

I'll be posting lecture one here shortly, but for now I'd like you to introduce yourself and get to know the other people in class with you. Tell us your name, location, what you write and your biggest question about characterization (or what you're hoping to get out of this class).

Who's up first? 😎

Lecture 1: Names are Powerful Things

Whether you plot first or come up with your characters first, in the end characters are what matter most. Readers remember characters. For instance if I say Scarlet, who immediately jumps to mind? If I say Sherlock Holmes, what do you think of? What about Hannible Lecter or Harry Potter? See, you're more aware of these characters than you realize. Characters become the cultural icons, not the plot. That's because all plots are derived from bout 26 different story lines. But that's not the point. The point is your character breathe life into your story.

So how can we create plot out of character?

I'm going to show you a nifty little shortcut I use and share a couple of resources I've found invaluable.

Here's how it works. The first thing you are going to do is come up with a name for your characters. Names have the power to mold perceptions. We write with precision and research when crafting our books. But have you ever struggled with your character's name only to find it didn't quite fit? When you're creating a character, the more rounded and realistic your can be, the better. Your character's name is no less important.

Would we have been as impressed by Pansy O'Hera as we were by Scarlet? (Margaret Mitchell originally named her heroine Pansy in Gone With The Wind.) Many celebrities also change their names. Why? Because a name is also about perception. Would we have fallen for Archibald Leach? Probably not, but Cary Grant looks didn't change, his name did. Can you picture a western picture staring Marion Michael Morrison? Would you feel better if I called him John Wayne? And what about writers. Do you think a following would have developed for author Eleanor Burford Hibbert? Neither did her publisher, which is why she writes as Victoria Holt.

Here are some additional names that changed:
• Jodie Foster was once Alicia Christian Foster
• Sandra Dee was known as Alexandra Zuck
• Kirk Douglas ditched his name of Issur Danielovitch Demsky
• Judy Garland was Frances Gumm

The point is, we associate certain feelings and make assumptions about people based on his or her name. One of the best sources I have found to help you understand how people perceive names is The Baby Name Personality Survey by Bruce Lansky & Barry Sinrod (ISBN 0-88166-164-3). It is based on a survey of over 75,000 people to determine the common images associated with 1,400 popular names. It's very useful in two ways. One you can see if your image of your character fits with what most people's image is, and either go with that image or deliberately go against it. Two you can get ideas for your character's image, insecurities and more from how people instantly react to that character's name.

Numbers and Your Characters

And as long as we're discussing names, do you realize that out of the ten best-selling romance authors of all time, five of them, 50%, have first names that begin with the letter "J"? Beyond perception, is there a significance between spelling your character's name Grey or Gray? Yes! Numerologists think so. Using the following technique I've even changed my character's name until I found the combination that rang true.

Here's how use numbers to gain characterization out of a name works:

STEP BY STEP GUIDE

STEP 1:
Spell out your character's full name (first middle and last) that they were given at birth. If they choose to call themselves a nickname or some other variation, spell that full name out for a separate calculation so you can compare. If they've been married (divorced, widowed, adopted) still use the original birth name as your base. The other names add layers on to the base characters through time.

STEP 2:
Numerologists have assigned each letter of the alphabet a number value 1 through 9. These values indicate certain personality traits and tendencies inherent in the name once added up. Use the following chart to assign the correct number value to each letter in your character's name. (Hint: place numbers for vowels above the letter and numbers for consonants below the letters to make your calculations easier. The letter "y" is counted as a vowel if it is the only vowel sound in the syllable, (i.e. Lyn-da has two syllables, the vowel in the first syllable is the "y" so it would be counted as a vowel in that case.)

AJS = 1 DMV = 4 GYP = 7
BKT = 2 NEW = 5 HQZ = 8
CLU = 3 FOX = 6 IR = 9

7 7 6 5 55
GYPSY ROSE LEE
7 7 1 9 1 3

STEP 3:
Add all the vowel numbers together for a value and all the consonant numbers together for a second value. You'll likely end up with a double digit number. Add these to digits together until you have a single number valued at 1 through 9. (i.e.. 55 = 5 + 5 = 10 = 1 + 0 = 1) So 55 would have an overall value of 1. Do this for both the consonant and vowel numbers.

7 7 6 5 55 = 35 = 3 + 5 = **8**

GYPSY ROSE LEE
7 7 1 9 1 3 = 28 = 2 + 8 = **10 = 1+0 = 1**

STEP 4:
Add the two original sums up and then reduce these to a single digit.

7 7 6 5 55 = 35 = 3 + 5 = **8**
GYPSY ROSE LEE 35 + 28 = 63 = 6 + 3 = **9**
7 7 1 9 1 3 = 28 = 2 + 8 = **10 = 1+0 = 1**

STEP 5:
Each of these single digits represents a different facet of your character's personality.

The vowel digit represents the *self motivation (MO)* of your character or the engines that drive the person to do what they do and choose what they choose in life. This is their Motivation in the Goal, Conflict, Motivation set up.

The consonant digit represents the *self image (IM),* the way the person sees him/herself. This can be equated to the character's Goal or an extension of that goal.

The combined digit represents *self expression (EX)*, the way other people perceive that character. This is where you find the Conflict, because rarely to other people see us as we see ourselves.

7 7 6 5 55 = 35 = 3 + 5 = **8 (MO)**
GYPSY ROSE LEE 35 + 28 = 63 = 6 + 3 = **9 (EX)**
7 71 9 1 3 = 28 = 2 + 8 = 10 = 1 + 0= **1 (IM)**

For Gypsy Rose Lee, each number is different, revealing a layering of the character and the potential for internal conflict between what motivates her (8 – the number of material power) and how others see her (9 – the number for the humanitarian). It also represents a potential for mistaken intentions since she sees herself as a leader (1) and is seen by others as a humanitarian (9). You'll also notice that the Y in Gypsy counted as vowels, that's because in that name (or when they come at the end of a word) they are acting as vowels, so put them on top.

NUMBER CHARACTERISTICS:

1 = LEADER
The top, the best. A person who is comfortable with taking charge in everything. A natural born leader. Characteristics best described as being in control, wanting to be first, competitive nature.

2 = HELPER
The quintessential power behind the throne. The one who knows how to get things done. Characteristics best described as detail oriented, interested in organization and the details of everything. Can be a busy-body.

3 = COMMUNICATOR
The creative number. This individual is the life of the party and can see similarities in diverse information. Primarily right-brained and tends to be unconventional.

4 = BUILDER
The embodiment of patience and persistence. Like a brick-layer, this person can build a wall if they do it methodically one brick at a time. While results may be slow, this person can achieve them. Characteristics best described as possessing diligent effort.

5 = SENSUAL FREEDOM
The person who wants to experience everything! They can be perceived as restless or ambitious in their need to go places, do things, explore and expand every horizon. Doesn't want to be tied down and prefers no restraints, wants to do and experience the very essence of life in all its glory.

6 = NURTURER
The number closest connected to family and all the harmonious, group associations a happy family can bring. Seeks to foster community spirit and cooperation and encourages others.

7 = CRITICAL ANALYZER
Picky, picky, picky. While possessed of great intuition, this person likes to see and understand beyond the obvious by dissecting every detail of life. This person has the potential for psychic understanding, but can also be a drag to others because they are always analyzing everything.

8 = MATERIAL POWER
If ever there was a number that attracted wealth in all its forms, this is it. New car, no problem. World trips, can do. Appreciates nice things. This number also possess the greatest vitality and life force and exudes POWER. Everything you can associate with power in the material world is personified by this number.

9 = HUMANITARIAN
The number of completion. The one who wants to benefit and help the whole world. Can sometimes be personified by the phrase, "I love humanity, its people I can't stand." Sees the larger purpose behind his/her actions and works for the greater good. Chooses to do things that will benefit people as a whole rather than as individuals. At the extreme can become a martyr.

Sample 1:

5 9 19 = 24 = 2 + 4 = **6 (MO)**
GREY SINCLAIR 44 = 68 = 6 + 8 = 14 = 1 + 4 = **5 (EX)**
7 9 7 1 5 33 9 = 44 = 4 + 4 = **8 (IM)**

This character is motivated by the need to nurture and have a "family" or community of which they feel a part. The character sees himself with material power, the ability of getting anything he wants without obstacles. Others see him as a person who desires to see, do and experience everything to its limits. An adventurer. Nothing is too brash or too impossible, if it can be a thrill. Internal conflicts could result from the ambition of how he sees himself and what truly motivates him since family or community may have to be pushed aside for ambition or power. Externally he may misunderstand how others see him and interpret their perceptions of him as a sensual person as merely a facet of his power. Would be very alluring physically and have magnetism.

1 9 19 = 20 = 2 + 0 = **2 (MO)**
GRAY SINCLAIR 20 + 44 = 64 = 6 + 4 = 10 = 1 + 0 = **1 (EX)**
7 9 7 1 5 33 9 = 44 = 4 + 4 = **8 (IM)**

This character is motivated by the need to be the power behind the throne. They get things done, but they don't often make the decision to get it done (those decisions are made for them or made through them). The character sees himself with material power, while others see him as a leader who can be a bit pushy at the extreme, but is some one they will take orders from and who seems to know what he is doing. External conflicts may arise because what truly motivates the character is to be the unseen power in the situation. This is put at odds with the role others cast him in as a leader in the spotlight. Internally, his perception of himself with material power will fit nicely with his true motivations to be the power behind the throne. He can use his influence to make things happen, without others realizing his intentions. Would be have a commanding presence and draw support to him.

REMINDER:
People's characteristics can change when their name does. Remnants of what they were named at birth will always influence a person, but the changes they encounter as a result of the name change are significant as well. Keep this in mind when developing your characters.

Assignment 1
Give it a try! If you need help, don't be afraid to post. We'll be working on this tomorrow and then on Wednesday talk about how we can take this further gaining a deeper understanding of your characters goal, motivation and conflict from what we've already learned.

Lecture 2: How to Further Enhance Characters with Numbers

I'm trusting that by now you've had a chance to try one or more character names by "running the numbers on it" with the technique in our first lecture.

Today we're going to look at ways you can further enhance your character using those same numbers.

Now that you've got your characters goal, motivation and conflicts out of their name, you can go even further. Several books can be used in conjunction with this method to pull even more character building tools out for you. Two of these include *You Are Your First Name* by Ellin Dodge (ISBN 0-671-61763-X) and *The Complete Writer's Guide to Heroes & Heroines Sixteen Master Archetypes* by Tami D. Cowden, Caro LaFever and Sue Viders (ISBN1-58065-024-4).

In the first book you'll find a wealth of information to many common names including suggested occupations, more goals, conflicts and motivation. An insight into how they react to their family and more.

With the Heroes & Heroines Archetype book, you can take the numbers you created and find exactly the archetypes that will work for your character.

Here are the archetype number matches I've found work best:

Men
The Chief – 1
The Bad Boy – 7
The Best Friend – 2, 3, 6
The Lost Soul – 4, 7
The Charmer – 8
The Professor – 4, 7
The Swashbuckler – 5
The Warrior – 9

Women
The Boss – 1
The Seductress – 8
The Spunky Kid – 2, 3
The Free Spirit – 5
The Librarian – 4, 7
The Waif – 6
The Crusader – 9
The Nurturer – 6

Now if you look at the archetype book, you'll find that it says characters can be effectively layered.

Let me give you an example. Here's one of my current characters:

1 5 6 6 1 = 19 = 1 +9 = 10 = 1 +0 = 1 (mo)
Slade Donovan 19 + 26 = 45 = 4 + 5 = 9 (ex)
13 4 4 5 4 5= 26 = 2 + 6 = 8 (im)

Using the numbers we learned yesterday we can see this character's drive or motivation (mo) is to be #1, the leader, obeyed by all and questioned by none. His self image (im) is being a person who has material power, able to attract and control wealth in all its forms. External people (ex) react to him as if he is a humanitarian, interested more in the greater good than in individual people - the essence of a warrior.

Now let's look at how the archetypes deepen these numbers adding even more layers instantly.

His motivation is to be a Chief. Again somebody in control. Virtues of a Chief are goal oriented, decisive and responsible. Flaws for a Chief are stubborn, unsympathetic and dominating. As a background the Chief has either always had a need to control his environment or he would rather lead than communicate. A Chief might be a born leader, where he's aware of his destiny and scared of only one thing - losing control, or else he might be a conqueror who demands respect and uses the establishment to further his goals. The book goes into much more detail about each of these aspects of course than I can here, including possible occupations and examples of such characters in literature and film.

Using the listing from the book above we see that Slade's self-image number, 8, would make him see himself as a Charmer. The Charmer has glitz, allure and appeal. He exudes, well, charm! But when the going gets tough, this guy usually finds something else to do. The virtues of a Charmer is being creative, witty and smooth. His flaws are being manipulative, irresponsible and elusive. (Are you starting to see how his internal motivation might cause some huge conflicts with how he sees himself?) The Charmer's background is that he knew how to please to get his way, he's the essence of the golden boy, beloved by all. He might be a playboy who never looses his cool and believes all of life is a stage and he's the star, or he might be a rogue who smiles to hide his sly side and uses his people-skills to get what he wants.

All of this gets even more interesting when we add the last layer - how other people see and react to this character. For Slade, other people are going to react to him as the number 9, Warrior archetype. The Warrior is dark and dangerous, remote, driven, controlled. His world is black and white. Period. He's merciless to his enemies, defender of the weak and believes only he can make a difference. The virtues of the Warrior are being tenacious, principled and noble. His vices are that he's self-righteous, relentless and merciless. As a background he either needs to right some wrong that happened in his childhood and step in to situations others are afraid to tackle (think of Batman or any other comic book hero) and does what he does because honor holds more appeal than wealth. He might be an avenger, where he's a reluctant hero, where he'd prefer peace but the injustice in the world around him demands action and he firmly believes in giving an eye for an eye, or he might be a knight where he acts as a savior out of duty and honor is

the highest calling.

Now that we've got all this, let's take a look at Slade one more time.

Here's a guy whose driven to lead the charge in a take no prisoners kind of way. He's use to getting his own way, by force if necessary or by manipulation using either charm or wit. When crossed he's going to only count on himself to save the day and he will get revenge, if not now some day because he considers it justice. He's not interested in anyone else's agenda, only his own, which he believes, incidently, is always right. While he thinks he doesn't want people counting on him, he actually thrives on it and deep down he knows he's meant to do something more than just serve himself and his own interests. He'll even go so far as to convince himself that he's serving his own interests, in order to actually serve the greater good and help those he believes deserve it.

All that in less than a half hour! See what I mean? Instant character. I also have a huge selection of suggested profesions for him, but I actually already know who and what he is in my story and can use those as a double check for myself. Will my readers see him as I see him - a security officer in a vampire clan who is actually half vampire/half shape-shifter, and the long-lost alpha heir to the pack of shape-shifters who is called upon to protect the vampires from an all out war with the shape-shifters? Is it a logical fit for the name? Absolutely.

Obviously I can't retype all the elements that are in the archetype book for you in this class. The point of today's lecture was to show you how you could use it as a tool to further deepen your character very quickly using the numbers you'd already derived from the name. You may choose to use it or not, but it will likely involve investing in a copy of the book (mine is so dog-eared it's embarassing).

Now, as to the other book I mentioned, You Are Your First Name. This book does something similar but since it doesn't contain all names, sometimes you have to do some calcualtions (which they show you how to in the front of the book step-by-step) to obtain the same information as the names actually listed in the book.

I like this book because if I'm toying with names for a character, before I even run numbers I can look up the name and see if the person described fits the character I'm thinking of. It gives general character traits, major talents and the extremes a character might go to. Again another excellent resource, but not absolutely necessary. Just happens to work for me.

So, if you'd like to share some insights after you've run the numbers on your character and discuss it, please feel free to post in the homework thread.

On Friday we'll be looking at creating plot from character.

Lecture 3: Creating Plot from Character

First, apologies to you if you were waiting for this lecture on Friday. Our power has been out due to winds (always an issue when you live with a bunch of tall fir trees and exposed power lines). So here we go, better late than never!

The decisions your character makes and the new dilemmas that arise from those decisions form the basic plot of your book. Now that you've got an idea of who your character is from running the numbers, let's look at their goals, conflicts and motivations and talk about how you can translate that directly into plotting your story (or revising if you've already written it.)

Goal and Motivation, frankly this is just a short-hand way of saying, what your character wants and why they want it. Looking at the MO number and the IM number should give you a pretty good idea. The MO is actually your character's motivation - the internal subliminal engines that drive him or her to do what they do below the level of his or her awareness. The IM number is the self image. It's how your character sees him or herself and they are going to think they want things based on this image.

Conflict is the why your character can have whatever she or he wants (goal) no matter why they want it (motivation). Look to your EX numbers to see how other people's expectations or view of your character might mess with their goal or their motivation.

Some of the best plot twists and turns have come from a character's conflict between their inner motivation MO and their self-perception IM.

For instance, if I have a hero who is a perceived to be a Best Friend by others, but who's inner motivation is to be a warrior and who's self-perception is a professor, this is going to be a guy who is a McGuyver type. He's going to use his wits to get out of the scrapes he gets himself into trying to save people because he cares about what happens to them and wants to help them. So what kind of situation can we put him in that's going to really mess with him?

What about if his little sister's best friend goes missing in the jungles of South America? He's going to feel obligated to do something about it, and it's going to put him in a terrible bind, especially if he happens to fall for his little sister's best friend. (See how we begin to derive plot from character?) Use whatever would be most difficult for a character to deal with or cause the biggest conflict between what truly motivates him or her and how they see themselves or how others see them. Make doing what comes naturally to them the absolute worst choice.

Remember, people's weaknesses will get them into trouble every time. It's their strengths that will save them in the end. For example, if a character's weakness is needing to be in charge (1 = leader and lesser degrees 9 = humantarian or 8 = material power) being in charge is going to mess up the situation every time they try to take over in the story. They are going to say "Follow me!" and land everybody following them in an even bigger mess. Their strength might be critical analysis (7) being able to pick things apart and

figure out why it's not working. That skill will allow them to get out of the trouble and wind up saving everyone.

So great, we've got a main plot. We're going to put our character in the worst possible situation. But what about creating subplots with our characters? There's usually more going on in a story than just one thread, right?

Ah, this is where plot can get a lot of help from character.

Subplots can come from the past of your main character. Perhaps they made a promise in the past that comes back to be called in at the worst time for your character in the main story.

Donald Maass, in his book *Writing the Breakout Novel* talks about making connections between your characters deeper and more layered to increase impact. For example, if a wife has an affair that's bad enough. But if that affair is with her husband's business partner, that's even worse. But what if it's a family-held company and his business partner is also his brother? Now how bad is the affair? How much deeper does it impact the situation of the characters? You might find a way to bounce back from an affair. You might even break things off with your business partner. But when it comes to a brother, you are talking about completely ripping apart a history and family which has far deeper emotional reach for your characters.

Look for opportunities to maximize these crossing lines of connection between characters. Remember every character in the story truly believes the story is all about him or her. From the lowliest walk-on character to your main hero and heroine, each one of them has a goal, a need, a purpose in your story, and they are going to do everything they can to reach that goal, fulfill that need and achieve that purpose.

So how do we use that to your benefit? As a storyteller we can make those characters deeper and more meaningful to our readers by really looking at those characters and allowing their subplots to become a more integral part of our overall story. This not only helps round out your characters, but it adds complexity to the storyline.

For instance, there's a huge rainstorm in my story that's threatening to cause a flood. I've got five characters who are in the story who all see and react differently to the event. I've got the husband and wife who are important, but not my main characters. I've got a teenager and her boyfriend who are my main characters and the repairman who is an additional character.

Now my main character, the teenager is concerned that her boyfriend hasn't emailed or texted her back. They were having a fight and were trying to work things out and he's just disappeared without a response. She's only getting voicemail on his cell phone She's really worried that he might break up with her. The storm is getting worse. The wife is fretting that the roof has a leak and that their house might flood. She's looking at the damage that's going to happen and all they are going to potential lose and trying to make decisions about what to take and what to leave behind in the case that they have to evacuate. The husband is trying to figure out how to get home. He's thinking that his stuff is important, but really, the rain isn't as bad as people are making it, and perhaps if

the roof leaks on the old television and ruins it, he can get the insurance company to spring for a new, bigger, better television so he can watch the big college football game coming up.

The wife has called the repairman to fix the leak. The repairman is happy about the work because he's been wondering how he was going to pay for his son's tuition to college once he graduates. He's also worried because his son has been seeming reluctant lately about going to college and he wants his son to get an education so he can have a chance at a better career and get out of the small town.

Here's where things get interesting. The repairman's son is dating the daughter of the married couple with the leaky roof. The reason the son is waffling about college is because the daughter is in the class beneath him and still has a year in school. His dad is pushing him to get out of the small town because he never did. He got a girl pregnant his senior year of high school, married her and never got to go to college. But the kid really loves his girlfriend and is trying to figure out how to not disappoint his dad and still salvage his relationship with the girl, but the storm had knocked out power to his house and he can't get service on his cell, so he's going to have to go to her house in the rain.

See how everyone has his or her own view going of this rainstorm?

So how do we deepen the characters in this story? We start crossing subplots in this story, making the threads of their lives intersect in unexpected ways with unexpected consequences and we end up with one seriously twisted plot.

What if the husband was the high school football star who got a full ride to college from their little town? What if he's also really the guy who got repairman's wife pregnant in high school and she told the repairman it was his because she wanted someone steady to help her through it? What if the wife/mom who called the repairman has found out about the secret and has been working behind the scenes to get the boyfriend all the scholarships she can and break up the relationship between these two kids to keep him away from her daughter, knowing what she knows? Did she call this repairman on purpose? Is she going to tell him? What if the husband comes home as she's revealing his secret and the daughter comes in to find out what the fuss is all about? What if the boyfriend shows up amid all this? What if the wife was wrong about which girl it was that her husband nailed in high school and was wrong about which repairman she called?

Do you see how we can start crossing threads, making what happens to each of these characters intensely interdependent on the secondary characters? All of a sudden there is a lot more at stake for the main characters than there ever was before and we've created plot from character.

By looking for ways subplots can now cross and intersect, we are deepening those characters. We are making their choices have more gravity and impact to the overall main story. We are having to dig deeper into their goals, their desires, their histories to know who and what they are and how they interrelate to the other people in the story.

Now, perhaps you are thinking, hey but my characters don't have anything in common. The bagging boy at the grocery story is just a walk on character. But what if he's not?

What if he's the son of your villain? What if he's secretly scouting out victims for your villain to protect his own mother/sister/grandmother/girlfriend? Just because you have a secondary character doesn't mean they can't play a bigger and better role in the story. You just have to look at the various subplots you have going and think about what other connections or roles that character could be playing in the over all plot.

By allowing there to be this cross-threading between characters you are creating more dimension not only to the characters themselves, but also to your main story via the subplots created by these characters and their efforts to be intently seeking their goals.

You're creating plot from character!

Lecture 4: The Power of Three in Character and Plotting

I don't know exactly what's happened this week. I'm blaming the cold medicine. So today, you are going to get TWO lectures (today's and Monday's).

Today we're going to talk about the Power of Three when creating plot from your character. Three has always been a powerful number. The Trinity. The Mother, Maiden and Crone. The Fates. The Pyramids. A three act play. The three Musketeers. The beginning, middle and end. Goal, conflict and resolution. In numerology, it's the number of communication and imagination. In your writing, and in your career it can actually be very helpful in a number of ways.

As human beings we tend to process information in sets. We like to lump things together and often learn by association of one thing with another thing similar to it. It's the reason when we talk to one another we say "It was like—" or "It was as if---" and people understand exactly what we are talking about.

The same thing happens when you are writing. The brain processes information the first time it is offered then continues to look for information similar to that first piece to lump them together into a set. Communications research has shown that three is the optimal number for the brain to remember. That's why a publicist will tell you to have no more than three message points or you'll hear a phone number repeated three times in a radio advertisement.

When you are writing, you are helping your reader get pulled deeper into the story by offering up information in sets of three. This can be done with foreshadowing, backstory, characterization, plotting and series development (why do you think trilogies are so popular?)

But wait, you say. Harry Potter had seven books. Some series have gone on fifteen books or longer. And what about the quartets? All of those work to some degree because they seem logical to the reader. For Harry Potter each book represented a year in his schooling, typically seven years of secondary schooling in England's boarding school system. It made sense. For the fifteen books, I'd have to say, what's five times three? Fifteen. Multiples of three work just as well when planning out a long series, so series of three, six, nine, twelve, fifteen, etc. would all do the job. As for quartets, have you ever noticed how they just don't seem as natural feeling as a trilogy?

One way you can make your writing more powerful is to utilize the power of three in your characterization and writing. All of our characters are different. They have different fears, different hopes, different dreams. To really make them stand out, you are going to want to foreshadowed these things at least three times over the course of the book before giving your readers the payoff moment. This gives you maximum impact with the reader, making them invested in the outcome of the payoff without boring their socks off with stuff that seems too repetitive. Now for larger stories, you might see foreshadowing happening in sets of three. Three moments that deal with the hero's deepest fear from his

past. Three moments where the hero and heroine almost come together, but don't yet have everything it takes to make that final commitment. Three scenes where the character is forced to make a choice and seems to screw it up making things worse every time, until finally they get it right in the payoff. Are you beginning to see how the Power of Three works with character to plot your story?

When I plot I use a huge poster board divided into a grid, one square per chapter. I then use colored sticky notes (in specific colors to represent different elements of my story or characters or subplots) to build out the scenes and help me plot. Because I'm such a visual person, doing it this way enables me to see where I've got repeating patterns in the colors and where I've got gaps in those patterns. Often, if I'm just noodeling out my story and I know there's an element, but I don't know exactly what it'll be yet, I'll actually put on the sticky notes Phobia # 1, Phobia # 2, Phobia # 3 and Phobia Payoff. That way I know it's a plotting thread in the story and it's in there, even if I'm not sure how it all will come together. I'm not saying that you all have to do it this way. Every author is different. I'm just sharing how the power of three enters into my plotting strategy.

Sometimes, especially when I get to a sagging middle, or what Debbie Macomber refers to as a "muddle", I'll look through the book and realize part of what's missing is one of the three plotting points for a particular story thread, or that I have two subplots, but really need a third to make things feel balanced.

You can also look at your plotting as a three-act play. The beginning and end of your story are going to take up about a third of your overall pages, and the middle about two-thirds. In act one, you have whatever happens to make your story start – the inciting incident or goal. As soon as your character has made a decision to does something to respond to the inciting incident, you've moved into act two, which is how the character deals with it (conflict). Act three is wrapping up what's happened as a result of your character dealing with the inciting incident (resolution). See how that works?

Some authors actually set up a scene/sequel pattern to their writing in sets of three things (which are talked about exhaustively in Dwight Swain's book ***Techniques of the Selling Writer*** and the counterpart to that Christopher Vogler's ***Writer's Journey*** – both excellent books on craft) Goal, Conflict, Disaster (that's your scene), Reaction, Dilemma, Decision (that's your sequel).

For characterization you can also use three main characteristics (and these are not physical descriptions) about each character throughout the book to identify him or her clearly to your reader and color his or her actions and decisions throughout the book. By picking three, you can shift between the characteristics often enough that you don't bore your reader and you make a deeper character. WARNING: Avoid picking conflicting characteristics, for instance a happy person who is depressed. It won't work well. Now you could have a happy person who is vicious, and controlling, and you'd end up with a psychopath, but that might work well for your villain. You could also have an outgoing person who is awkward and inappropriate and you'd end up with fumbling best friend or the odd-guy out character you see in buddy films. Sometimes it works best when two of the characteristics are similar and one is a little off beat.

You can also pick out three physical descriptions of your character, to give your readers an instant short-hand glimpse of your character. This is done a lot by bestselling authors. For example a character might be described as short, stout and bald as a cue ball, or willowy, graceful and exotic. You get two totally different images from those sets of three words in an instant. Work on it with your own characters and see what you come up with.

As you can see, the Power of Three is all over the place when it comes to writing with plot and character.

Assignment 2

For today's exercise, it should come as no surprise we're going to split it into three parts.

Part 1: Take three of your characters and list their three characteristics and three physical appearance descriptions. Start with what immediately comes to mind, then review and refine it until you have something that really sets your characters apart and makes them vivid.

Part 2: Try your hand and writing up a scene and sequel for your story using the Goal, Conflict, Disaster and Reaction, Dilemma, Decision model. It can be really short and specific. For example:
Goal: Hero has to go look for the missing piece of the Book of Legend he's searching for in a mine on the edge of Hell.
Conflict: He's with a succubus who also wants it, but he needs her in order to get to it when he finds it.
Disaster: He has to swim across a lake filled with water sprites to get to it and has a fear of water.
Reaction: He decides to take her with him.
Delimma: He doesn't think he's going to make it back across the lake.
Decision: In a moment of panic, he decides to trust her enough to ask her to take it back to his brother.

Part 3: Write down three things you want your character to have learned by the end of the story and then three ways or scenes in which you'll see those things happen.

Lecture 5: Questions to Create Character

I'm going to assume you tried running the numbers on your character and now have a name and a fairly good idea of how the character sees himself, what motivates him and how others perceive him. You also probably have three characteristics that describe your character and perhaps three physical traits as well. You might even know your chracter's goal, conflict and motivation.

But let's dig a little deeper into creating your characters so that they are developed enough to really grow through your story.

Let's start with these:

1. What is his/her error in thinking?
This is a core belief, something they tell themselves and use it as a guide line when making decisions, for example believing that they are not worthy of love or duty comes before everything else no matter what.

2.Why do they hold this belief?
This is going to help you dig into your character's backstory and find that moment in time where this belief crystalized for the first time or was reinforced over and over again to make the character deeply believe it to be true.

3. As a result of this belief, what do they need to learn?
Here's the opportunity to find out what your character's growth arc through the story is going to be.

4. What is keeping them from learning this lesson?
You've got where they are and see where they need to grow to, here's your chance to find at least three scenes and a payoff scene to get them there.

5. What are they missing out on in life by not changing?
The answers here can be what we call your character's slams. Things that bang them up against the side of the head over and over again to remind them at the worst possible moment what they wish they had (goal) and give them motivation to get there.

6. How do they cheat to get what they want without having to grow?
Hey, growth is painful. Your characters are going to fight, kick and scream to keep the status quo. So exactly what little white lies, bad choices and out-of-character things will they do to avoid changing?

7. What's the external flash point that forces your characters to choose or change in the story?
This can be your Dark Moment. It can happen mid-way through your story and then you can show your character having to cope with the changes and the cheats that they did

earlier even though they've changed.

Here's some other things you can ask to bump up your conflict. Remember each one of these is loaded with potential for scenes in your story.

1. What makes the other characters in the story emotionally dangerous to your main character?

2. What makes it impossible for your main character to walk away from the other characters?

3. What does your main character admire/loath about the other characters?

4. What about the other characters makes your main character want to change?

5. How do the other characters help your main character learn his/her lesson or grow into their character arc?

Once you've answered all these questions, take a look and see which of them can be turned directly into scenes and which ones might need multiple scenes (a set of three and a payoff) to flesh out your plot.

I usually write down every scene I can think of at random on individual sticky notes then organize them and put them down on my plotting grid board. Some authors find that organizing the scenes in the scene-sequel manner introduced in the last lecture is more helpful. Do what works for you.

Character is indeed central to our plot. Without characters there would be no plot.

So, questions, comments? Feel free to post!

Lecture 6: Making your Characters Come Alive & Wrap Up

Well, this is our final lecture for this class. Today we're going to look at things you can do to instantly make your character come to life in the pages of your story. We're also going to wrap up the class and open the floor to final questions. Remember class ends tomorrow, so I'll be answering questions for the next 24 hours.

Bringing your character to life in the pages of your book is about far more than how he or she looks, or his or her name (although we've seen how that can influence the way people react to your character.) The biggest challenge writers face is creating a solid Point of View (POV) for their characters.

Your character's POV is going to be impacted by a great many things. It'll be impacted by the backstory of your character. For example, a person raised in a loving home with lots of close family is going to perceive things and act differently than a person raised by an drug-addicted single parent who mostly depended on that child as a caretaker.

It'll also be impacted by your character's career choices. A character who is still a high school student is going to act far differently and have a different set of expectations and reactions than someone whose been in Special Forces Black Ops. The word choices will be different. The way they describe things or react to people and situations around them will be different. (Remember the bit we did about the family in the storm and how everyone saw the storm differently?)

Finally your character is also going to be impacted by, well, their character! If you've selected three characterisitcs that define your person as excitable, but clumsy and socially inappropriate you are going to have a totally different person than someone who is positive, but vengeful and stingy.

So how do you show this?

First of all remember that the backstory needs to be inserted into the story in small slivers, like a broken mirror. In the middle of dialog it's OK for your character to have an instant where he or she reflects back to a situation in their past similiar to the one they are in now. It's also ok for them to think about how it made them feel or what they decided as a result. Think about the word choices a character uses as a result of their background and experience. A sailor is going to see a woman's hair unfurl like a sail, while a hockey mom is going to see a guy with mussed hair as helmet head. See the difference?

Let me show you another example with dialog. This is a scene from a book that won't be out until Nov., The Hunter, where the hero (a hunter of supernatural beings) is talking with a succubus he's summoned (the heroine) to help him in his quest.

First let me show you what it would be if the dialog were the only thing there and the backstory and POV of the character was stripped out.

"So that's it?" he asked, eyeing her with suspicion.
"And look, you're still alive." Her tone was mocking, but she couldn't
hide the bitter edge of anger there.
"Having second thoughts about our bargain?" Colt drawled as he looked
deeply into her eyes.
"Are you? Just how many bargains have you struck with demons?"
"None. But there's always a first time for everything, isn't there?"
"True. But it doesn't mean it always turns out the way you expect," she
said, tipping her chin up a notch.
The Hunter's glacier blue gaze bore into her. "If you want me to stick
to our bargain, you'd better not double back on your word, demon."
She stiffened. "I never forget a promise."

Now with the added POV of the female character and the backstory. Look at how much
richer it becomes, how much more fleshed out the character is:

"So that's it?" he asked, eyeing her with suspicion.
"And look, you're still alive." Her tone was mocking, but she couldn't
hide the bitter edge of anger there. In all her fifty years as a demon,
never once had she been affected by the men she seduced. She'd rarely
even looked at their faces. All she'd pictured was the look on her
father's face when he'd met his match in Rathe as she took their
proffered souls.
"Having second thoughts about our bargain?" Colt drawled as he looked
deeply into her eyes.
Lilly steeled her spine and deliberately softened her face so he
wouldn't guess at her inner turmoil. How was she to have known he'd
have this kind of effect on her? "Are you? Just how many bargains have
you struck with demons?"
"None. But there's always a first time for everything, isn't there?"
The words lashed at her like a bullwhip, the sting of them making her
wince. A first and a last time. The truth was she'd been introduced to
Hell long before Rathe came along. From the minute she could toddle her
father had exploited her keen mind and unusual looks. She'd been part
of nearly every con he played and, thanks to her efforts, they'd
managed a dishonest living.
"True. But it doesn't mean it always turns out the way you expect," she
said, tipping her chin up a notch.
She'd grown tired of the charade her mortal life had become, the
constant running and the lies. She'd wanted a normal life for her and
her sister, maybe even a husband and a family of her own. But the
minute she'd suggested that to her father, any ounce of kindness had
vanished. He'd threatened her. If she left, he'd turn her younger
sister Amelia into a means for profit any way he could. And while
Amelia was a delicate beauty in her own right, she didn't possess half
of Lilly's fire, determination and cunning. She'd never be able to pull
off the cons her father favored, which meant her future was bleak.
Lilly couldn't let that happen. She'd kept up the cons until she could
find a way out for both she and her sister. It had tainted her soul and
shredded every ounce of decency within her, but she'd done it, by God.
And she'd hated her father more by the minute. But it had taught her
something valuable—there was always a way out, if you were able to
accept the cost.

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The Hunter's glacier blue gaze bore into her. "If you want me to stick
to our bargain, you'd better not double back on your word, demon."
She stiffened. "I never forget a promise."
Lilly had promised herself that her little sister Amelia would never
know the touch of a man until she invited it herself. There'd been only
one way Lilly could think to stop her father's plans. She'd summoned
Rathe, and in exchange for the fiend killing her father and sending him
to Hell where the bastard belonged, the demon had taken her soul.
It seemed a small price to pay to protect her sister. And until now it
had been relatively easy. No emotion. No true impulse. Just her doing
what she'd always had to do and harvesting their nearly worthless souls
in the process for Rathe.
But Colt Ambrose Jackson had just done the unexpected. He'd made her
want to kiss him. He'd made her desire him. Damn him.
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Notice her word choices when she's in her POV - exploited, charade, dishonest, bullwhip, harvesting,

We can tell automatically that her past is a painful one. We can tell there are far more issues with her than just that the hero's a hunter and her job is to steal his soul. We can also see her need for affection that's not based on motive. All those things make her seem more real, even if we don't know the color of her hair or her eyes or who tall she is or howed she's shaped.

Making your character come to life isn't about telling your reader what they look like. It's about trying on your character's shoes, looking at the world through his or her eyes like you're walking around in his or her skin for the scene. Show the reader what they sense, with touch, taste, smell, hearing, sight and intuition. Let them hear the character's inner thoughts and deepest secrets and doubts. Let them feel the character's emotions.

I hope that you've gotten something out of this character development class to add to your writer's tool box. I'm always amazed at how what works for one writer is totally different for another. Use what works for you and discard the rest. In the end, only you will write like you.

Thanks for joining me in class!

Best Regards,
Theresa Meyers

Appendix 1: Resource Links

Here's those books I mentioned again in lecture two (with links!) to make them easier to find for you.

The Complete Writer's Guide to Heroes & Heroines: Sixteen Master Archetypes by Tami D. Cowden, Caro LaFever, and Sue Viders ISBN: 1-58065-024-4

You Are Your First Name by Ellin Dodge ISBN:0-671-61763-X

Here's another book I mentioned that had plotting and crossing the threads of your characters for greater complexity, which is a great writer's resource no matter what genre you write in:

Writing the Breakout Novel by Donald Maass ISBN:158297182X