THE MIND WORM

As I traced the evolution of story through the twenty-eight centuries since Homer, I thought I'd save a thousand years and skip from the fourth century to the Renaissance because, according to my undergrad history text, during the Dark Ages all thinking stopped while monks dithered over such questions as "How many angels dance on the head of a pin?" Skeptical. I looked a little deeper and found that in fact intellectual life in the medieval epoch went on vigorously . . . but in poetic code. When the metaphor was deciphered, researchers discovered that "How many angels dance on the head of pin?" isn't metaphysics, it's physics. The topic under discussion is atomic structure: "How small is small?"

To discuss psychology, medieval scholarship devised another ingenious conceit: the Mind Worm. Suppose a creature had the power to burrow into the brain and come to know an individual completely—dreams, fears, strength, weakness. Suppose that this Mind Worm also had the power to cause events in the world. It could then create a specific happening geared to the unique nature of that person that would trigger a one-of-a-kind adventure, a quest that would force him to use himself to the limit, to live to his deepest and fullest. Whether a tragedy or fulfillment, this quest would reveal his humanity absolutely.

Reading that I had to smile, for the writer is a Mind Worm. We too burrow into a character to discover his aspects, his potential.
then create an event geared to his unique nature—the Inciting Incident. For each protagonist it’s different—for one perhaps finding a fortune, for another losing a fortune—but we design the event to fit the character, the precise happening needed to send him on a quest that reaches the limits of his being. Like the Mind Worm, we explore the inscape of human nature, expressed in poetic code. For as centuries pass, nothing changes within us. As William Faulkner observed, human nature is the only subject that doesn’t date.

Characters Are Not Human Beings

A character is no more a human being than the Venus de Milo is a real woman. A character is a work of art, a metaphor for human nature. We relate to characters as if they were real, but they’re superior to reality. Their aspects are designed to be clear and knowable; whereas our fellow humans are difficult to understand, if not enigmatic. We know characters better than we know our friends because a character is eternal and unchanging, while people shift—just when we think we understand them, we don’t. In fact, I know Rick Blaine in CASABLANCA better than I know myself. Rick is always Rick. I’m a bit iffy.

Character design begins with an arrangement of the two primary aspects: Characterization and True Character. To repeat: Characterization is the sum of all the observable qualities, a combination that makes the character unique: physical appearance coupled with mannerisms, style of speech and gesture, sexuality, age, IQ, occupation, personality, attitudes, values, where he lives, how he lives. True Character waits behind this mask. Despite his characterization, at heart who is this person? Loyal or disloyal? Honest or a liar? Loving or cruel? Courageous or cowardly? Generous or selfish? Willful or weak?

TRUE CHARACTER can only be expressed through choice in dilemma. How the person chooses to act under pressure is who he is—the greater the pressure, the truer and deeper the choice to character.
The key to True Character is desire. In life, if we feel stifled, the fastest way to get unstuck is to ask, "What do I want?" listen to the honest answer, then find the will to pursue that desire. Problems still remain, but now we're in motion with the chance of solving them. What's true of life is true of fiction. A character comes to life the moment we glimpse a clear understanding of his desire—not only the conscious, but in a complex role, the unconscious desire as well.


Behind desire is motivation. Why does your character want what he wants? You have your ideas about motive, but don't be surprised if others see it differently. A friend may feel that parental upbringing shaped your character's desires; someone else may think it's our materialist culture; another may blame the school system; yet another may claim it's in the genes; still another thinks he's possessed by the devil. Contemporary attitudes tend to favor mono-explanations for behavior, rather than the complexity of forces that's more likely the case.

Do not reduce characters to case studies (an episode of child abuse is the cliché in vogue at the moment), for in truth there are no definitive explanations for anyone's behavior. Generally, the more the writer nails motivation to specific causes, the more he diminishes the character in the audience's mind. Rather, think through to a solid understanding of motive, but at the same time leave some mystery around the whys, a touch of the irrational perhaps. Room for the audience to use its own life experience to enhance your character in its imagination.

In *King Lear*, for example, Shakespeare cast one of his most complex villains, Edmund. After a scene in which astrological influences, yet another mono-explanation of behavior, are blamed for someone's misfortune, Edmund turns in soliloquy and laughs, "I should have been what I am had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardy." Edmund does evil for the pure pleasure of it. Beyond that, what matters? As Aristotle observed, why a man does a
thing is of little interest once we see the thing he does. A character is the choices he makes to take the actions he takes. Once the deed is done his reasons why begin to dissolve into irrelevancy.

The audience comes to understand your character in a variety of ways: The physical image and setting say a lot, but the audience knows that appearance is not reality, characterization is not true character. Nonetheless, a character’s mask is an important clue to what may be revealed.

What other characters say about a character is a hint. We know that what one person says of another may or may not be true, given the axes people have to grind, but that it’s said and by whom is worth knowing. What a character says about himself may or may not be true. We listen, but then put it in our pockets.

In fact, characters with lucid self-knowledge, those reciting self-explanatory dialogue meant to convince us that they are who they say they are, are not only boring but phony. The audience knows that people rarely, if ever, understand themselves, and if they do, they’re incapable of complete and honest self-explanation. There’s always a subtext. If, by chance, what a character says about himself is actually true, we don’t know it’s true until we witness his choices made under pressure. Self-explanation must be validated or contradicted in action. In CASABLANCA when Rick says, “I stick my neck out for no man,” we think, “Well, not yet, Rick, not yet.” We know Rick better than he knows himself, for indeed he’s wrong; he’ll stick his neck out many times.

**Character Dimension**

“Dimension” is the least understood concept in character. When I was an actor, directors would insist on “round, three-dimensional characters,” and I was all for that, but when I asked them what exactly is a dimension and how do I create one, let alone three, they’d waffle, mumble something about rehearsal, then stroll away.

Some years ago a producer pitched me what he believed to be a “three-dimensional” protagonist in these terms: “Jessie just got out of prison, but while he was in the slammer he boned up on finance
and investment, so he's an expert on stocks, bonds, and securities. He can also break dance. He's got a black belt in karate and plays a mean jazz saxophone." His "Jessie" was as flat as a desktop—a cluster of traits stuck on a name. Decorating a protagonist with quirks does not open his character and draw empathy. Rather, eccentricities may close him off and keep us at a distance.

A favorite academic tenet argues that, instead, fine characters are marked by one dominant trait. Macbeth's ambition is frequently cited. Overweening ambition, it's claimed, makes Macbeth great. This theory is dead wrong. If Macbeth were merely ambitious, there'd be no play. He'd simply defeat the English and rule Scotland. Macbeth is a brilliantly realized character because of the contradiction between his ambition on one hand and his guilt on the other. From this profound inner contradiction springs his passion, his complexity, his poetry.

*Dimension means contradiction:* either within deep character (guilt-ridden ambition) or between characterization and deep character (a charming thief). These contradictions must be *consistent*. It doesn't add dimension to portray a guy as nice throughout a film, then in one scene have him kick a cat.

Consider Hamlet, the most complex character ever written. Hamlet isn't three-dimensional, but ten, twelve, virtually uncountably dimensional. He seems spiritual until he's blasphemous. To Ophelia he's first loving and tender, then callous, even sadistic. He's courageous, then cowardly. At times he's cool and cautious, then impulsive and rash, as he stabs someone hiding behind a curtain without knowing who's there. Hamlet is ruthless and compassionate, proud and self-pitying, witty and sad, weary and dynamic, lucid and confused, sane and mad. His is an innocent worldliness, a worldly innocence, a living contradiction of almost any human qualities we could imagine.

Dimensions fascinate; contradictions in nature or behavior rivet the audience's concentration. Therefore, the protagonist must be the most dimensional character in the cast to focus empathy on the star role. If not, the Center of Good defecters: the fictional universe flies apart; the audience loses balance.
BLADE RUNNER: Marketing positioned the audience to empathize with Harrison Ford’s Rick Deckard, but once in the theatre, filmgoers were drawn to the greater dimensionality of the replicant Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer). As the Center of Good shifted to the antagonist, the audience’s emotional confusion diminished its enthusiasm, and what should have been a huge success became a cult film.

**Cast Design**

In essence, the protagonist creates the rest of the cast. All other characters are in a story first and foremost because of the relationship they strike to the protagonist and the way each helps to delineate the dimensions of the protagonist’s complex nature. Imagine a cast as a kind of solar system with the protagonist as the sun, supporting roles as planets around the sun, bit players as satellites around the planets—all held in orbit by the gravitational pull of the star at the center, each pulling at the tides of the others’ natures.

Consider this hypothetical protagonist: He’s amusing and optimistic, then morose and cynical; he’s compassionate, then cruel; fearless, then fearful. This four-dimensional role needs a cast around him to delineate his contradictions, characters toward whom he can act and react in different ways at different times and places. These supporting characters must round him out so that his complexity is both consistent and credible.

Character A, for example, provokes the protagonist’s sadness and cynicism, while Character B brings out his witty, hopeful side. Character C inspires his loving and courageous emotions, while Character D forces him first to cower in fear, then to strike out in fury. The creation and design of characters A, B, C, and D is dictated by the needs of the protagonist. They are what they are principally to make clear and believable, through action and reaction, the complexity of the central role.

Although supporting roles must be scaled back from the protagonist, they too may be complex. Character A could be two-dimensional: outwardly beautiful and loving/inwardly grotesque as choices under pressure reveal cold, mutated desires. Even one
dimension can create an excellent supporting role. Character B could, like the Terminator, have a single yet fascinating contradiction: machine versus human. If the Terminator were merely a robot or a man from the future, he might not be interesting. But he's both, and his machine/human dimension makes a superb villain.

The physical and social world in which a character is found, his or her profession or neighborhood, for example, is an aspect of characterization. Dimension, therefore, can be created by a simple counterpoint: Placing a conventional personality against an exotic background, or a strange, mysterious individual within an ordinary, down-to-earth society immediately generates interest.

Bit parts should be drawn deliberately flat... but not dull. Give each a freshly observed trait that makes the role worth playing for the moment the actor's onscreen, but no more.
For example, suppose your protagonist is visiting New York City for the first time, and as she steps out of Kennedy Airport, she can’t wait for her first ride with a New York taxi driver. How to write that role? Do you make him a philosophizing eccentric with a baseball cap sideways on his head? I hope not. For the last six decades every time we get in a cab in a New York movie, there he is, the kooky New York cab driver.

Perhaps you create the screen’s first silent New York cab driver. She tries to start New York conversations about the Yankees, the Knicks, the mayor’s office, but he just straightens his tie and drives on. She slumps back, her first New York disappointment.

On the other hand, the cab driver to end all cab drivers: a gravel-voiced but wonderfully obliging oddball who gives her a definitive tutorial in big-city survival—how to wear her purse strap across her chest, where to keep her mace can. Then he drives her to the Bronx, charges her a hundred and fifty bucks and tells her she’s in Manhattan. He comes on helpful, turns into a thieving rat—a contradiction between characterization and deep character. Now we’ll be looking all over the film for this guy because we know that writers don’t put dimensions in characters they’re not going to use again. If this cabby doesn’t show up at least once more, we’ll be very annoyed. Don’t cause false anticipation by making bit parts more interesting than necessary.

The cast orbits around the star, its protagonist. Supporting roles are inspired by the central character and designed to delineate his complex of dimensions. Secondary roles need not only the protagonists but also one another, to bring out their dimensions. As tertiary characters (E and F on the diagram) have scenes with the protagonist or other principals, they also help reveal dimensions. Ideally, in every scene each character brings out qualities that mark the dimensions of the others, all held in constellation by the weight of the protagonist at the center.

The Comic Character

All characters pursue desire against forces of antagonism. But the dramatic character is flexible enough to step back from the risk and
realize: "This could get me killed." Not the comic character. The comic character is marked by a blind obsession. The first step to solving the problem of a character who should be funny but isn't is to find his mania.

When the political satires of Aristophanes and farcical romances of Menander passed into history, Comedy degenerated into the ribald, peasant cousin of Tragedy and Epic Poetry. But with the coming of the Renaissance—from Goldoni in Italy to Molière in France (skipping Germany) to Shakespeare, Jonson, Wycherley, Congreve, Sheridan; through Shaw, Wilde, Coward, Chaplin, Allen, the crackling wits of England, Ireland, and America—it ascended into the gleaming art of today—the saving grace of modern life.

As these masters perfected their art, like all craftsmen, they talked shop and came to realize that a comic character is created by assigning the role a "humour," an obsession the character does not see. Molière's career was built on writing plays ridiculing the protagonist's fixation—The Miser, The Imaginary Invalid, The Misanthrope. Almost any obsession will do. Shoes, for example. Imelda Marcos is an international joke because she doesn't see her neurotic need for shoes, by some estimates over three thousand pairs. Although in her tax trial here in New York she said it was only twelve hundred . . . and none fit. They're gifts from shoe companies, she claimed, who never get the size right.

In All in the Family Archie Bunker (Carroll O'Connor) was a blindly obsessed bigot. As long as he doesn't see it, he's a buffoon and we laugh at him. But if he were to turn to someone and say, "You know, I am a racist hate monger," the comedy is over.

A SHOT IN THE DARK: A chauffeur is murdered on the estate of Benjamin Ballon (George Saunders). Enter a man obsessed with being the world's most perfect detective, Captain Clouseau (Peter Sellers), who decides that Ballon did the deed and confronts the billionaire in the billiards room. As Clouseau lays out his evidence, he rips the felt on the pool table and smashes the cues, finally summing up with: "... and zen you killed him in a rit of fealous jage." Clouseau turns to leave but walks around the wrong side of the
door. We hear THUMP as he hits the wall. He steps back and with cool contempt, says, “Stupid architects.”

A FISH CALLED WANDA: Wanda (Jamie Lee Curtis), a master criminal, is obsessed with men who speak foreign languages. Otto (Kevin Kline), a failed CIA agent, is convinced he’s an intellectual—although, as Wanda points out, he makes mistakes such as thinking that the London Underground is a political movement. Ken (Michael Palin) is so obsessed with a love of animals that Otto tortures him by eating his goldfish. Archie Leach (John Cleese) has an obsessive fear of embarrassment, a fear, he tells us, that grips the whole English nation. Midway through the film, however, Archie realizes his obsession and once he sees it, he turns from comic protagonist to romantic lead, from Archie Leach to “Cary Grant.” (Archie Leach was Cary Grant’s real name.)

Three Tips on Writing Characters for the Screen

1. Leave room for the actor.
This old Hollywood admonition asks the writer to provide each actor with the maximum opportunity to use his or her creativity; not to overwrite and pepper the page with constant description of behaviors, nuances of gesture, tones of voice:

Bob leans on the lectern, crossing one leg over the other, one arm akimbo. He looks out over the heads of the students, arching an eyebrow thoughtfully:

BOB
(phlegmatically)
Blaa, blaa, blaa, blaa, blaa

An actor’s reaction to a script saturated with that kind of detail is to toss it in the trash, thinking, “They don’t want an actor, they want a puppet.” Or if the actor accepts the role, he’ll take a red pencil and scratch all that nonsense off the page. The details above
are meaningless. An actor wants to know: What do I want? Why do I want it? How do I go about getting it? What stops me? What are the consequences? The actor brings a character to life from the subtext out: desire meeting forces of antagonism. On-camera he'll say and do what the scene requires, but characterization must be his work as much as or more than yours.

We must remember that, unlike the theatre where we hope our work will be performed in hundreds, if not thousands of productions, here and abroad, now and into the future, on screen there will be only one production, only one performance of each character fixed on film forever. Writer/actor collaboration begins when the writer stops dreaming of a fictional face and instead imagines the ideal casting. If a writer feels that a particular actor would be his ideal protagonist and he envisions her while he writes, he'll be constantly reminded of how little superb actors need to create powerful moments, and won't write this:

**BARBARA**

*(offering Jack a cup)*

Would you like this cup of coffee, darling?

The audience sees it's a cup of coffee; the gesture says, "Would you like this?"; the actress is feeling "darling..." Sensing that less is more, the actress will turn to her director and say: "Larry, do I have to say 'Would you like this cup of coffee, darling?' I mean, I'm offering the damn cup, right? Could we just cut that line?" The line is cut, the actress sets the screen on fire silently offering a man a cup of coffee, while the screenwriter rages, "They're butchering my dialogue!"

**2. Fall in love with all your characters.**

We often see films with a cast of excellent characters... except one, who's dreadful. We wonder why until we realize that the writer hates this character. He's trivializing and insulting this role
at every opportunity. And I'll never understand this. How can a writer hate his own character? It's his baby. How can he hate what he gave life? Embrace all your creations, especially the bad people. They deserve love like everyone else.

Hurt and Cameron must have loved their Terminator. Look at the wonderful things they did for him: In a motel room he repairs a damaged eye with an Exacto knife. Standing over a sink, he prises his eyeball out of his head, drops it in the water, mops up the blood with a towel, puts on Gargoyle sunglasses to hide the hole, then looks in the mirror and smooths down his tangled hair. The stunned audience thinks, "He just prised his eyeball out of his head and he gives a damn what he looks like. He's got vanity!"

Then a knock at the door. As he looks up, the camera takes his POV and we see his computer screen super-imposed over the door. On it is a list of responses to someone knocking: "Go away," "Please come back later," "Fuck off," "Fuck off, asshole." His cursor goes up and down while he makes his choice and stops at "Fuck off, asshole." A robot with a sense of humor. Now the monster's all the more terrifying, for thanks to these moments we have no idea of what to expect from him, and therefore imagine the worst. Only writers who love their characters discover such moments.

A hint about villains: If your character's up to no good and you place yourself within his being, asking, "If I were he in this situation, what would I do?", you'd do everything possible to get away with it. Therefore, you would not act like a villain; you would not twist your mustache. Sociopaths are the most charming folks we ever meet—sympathetic listeners who seem so deeply concerned about our problems while they lead us to hell.

An interviewer once remarked to Lee Marvin that he'd played villains for thirty years and how awful it must be always playing bad people. Marvin smiled, "Me? I don't play bad people. I play people struggling to get through their day, doing the best they can with what life's given them. Others may think they're bad, but no, I never play bad people." That's why Marvin could be a superb villain. He was a craftsman with a deep understanding of human nature: No one thinks they're bad.
If you can’t love them, don’t write them. On the other hand, permit neither your empathy nor antipathy for a character to produce melodrama or stereotype. Love them all without losing your clearheadedness.

3. Character is self-knowledge.

Everything I learned about human nature I learned from me.
—Anton Chekhov

Where do we find our characters? Partly through observation. Writers often carry notepads or pocket tape recorders and as they watch life’s passing show, collect bits and pieces to fill file cabinets with random material. When they’re dry, they dip in for ideas to stir the imagination.

We observe, but it’s a mistake to copy life directly to the page. Few individuals are as clear in their complexity and as well delineated as a character. Instead, like Dr. Frankenstein, we build characters out of parts found. A writer takes the analytical mind of his sister and pieces it together with the comic wit of a friend, adds to that the cunning cruelty of a cat and the blind persistence of King Lear. We borrow bits and pieces of humanity, raw chunks of imagination and observation from wherever they’re found, assemble them into dimensions of contradiction, then round them into the creatures we call characters.

Observation is our source of characterizations, but understanding of deep character is found in another place. The root of all fine character writing is self-knowledge.

One of the sad truths of life is that there’s only one person in this vale of tears that we ever really know, and that’s ourselves. We’re essentially and forever alone. Yet, although others remain at a distance, changing and unknowable in a definitive, final sense, and despite the obvious distinctions of age, sex, background, and culture, despite all the clear differences among people, the truth is we are all far more alike than we are different. We are all human.
We all share the same crucial human experiences. Each of us is suffering and enjoying, dreaming and hoping of getting through our days with something of value. As a writer, you can be certain that everyone coming down the street toward you, each in his own way, is having the same fundamental human thoughts and feelings that you are. This is why when you ask yourself, “If I were this character in these circumstances, what would I do?” the honest answer is always correct. You would do the human thing. Therefore, the more you penetrate the mysteries of your own humanity, the more you come to understand yourself, the more you are able to understand others.

When we survey the parade of characters that has marched out of the imaginations of storytellers from Homer to Shakespeare, Dickens, Austen, Hemingway, Williams, Wilder, Bergman, Goldman, and all other masters—each character fascinating, unique, sublimely human and so many, many of them—and realize that all were born of a single humanity . . . it's astounding.