Plot or character? Which is more important? This debate is as old as the art. Aristotle weighed each side and concluded that story is primary, character secondary. His view held sway until, with the evolution of the novel, the pendulum of opinion swung the other way. By the nineteenth century many held that structure is merely an appliance designed to display personality, that what the reader wants is fascinating, complex characters. Today both sides continue the debate without a verdict. The reason for the hung jury is simple: The argument is specious.

We cannot ask which is more important, structure or character, because structure is character; character is structure. They’re the same thing, and therefore one cannot be more important than the other. Yet the argument goes on because of a widely held confusion over two crucial aspects of the fictional role—the difference between Character and Characterization.

CHARACTER VERSUS CHARACTERIZATION

Characterization is the sum of all observable qualities of a human being, everything knowable through careful scrutiny: age and IQ; sex and sexuality; style of speech and gesture; choices of home, car, and dress; education and occupation; personality and nervousity; values and attitudes—all aspects of humanity we could know by taking notes on someone day in and day out. The totality of these traits
makes each person unique because each of us is a one-of-a-kind combination of genetic givens and accumulated experience. This singular assemblage of traits is *characterization* . . . but it is not *character*.

**TRUE CHARACTER is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure—the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation, the truer the choice to the character’s essential nature.**

Beneath the surface of characterization, regardless of appearances, who is this person? At the heart of his humanity, what will we find? Is he loving or cruel? Generous or selfish? Strong or weak? Truthful or a liar? Courageous or cowardly? The only way to know the truth is to witness him make choices under pressure to take one action or another in the pursuit of his desire. As he chooses, he is.

Pressure is essential. Choices made when nothing is at risk mean little. If a character chooses to tell the truth in a situation where telling a lie would gain him nothing, the choice is trivial, the moment expresses nothing. But if the same character insists on telling the truth when a lie would save his life, then we sense that honesty is at the core of his nature.

Consider this scene: Two cars motor down a highway. One is a rusted-out station wagon with buckets, mops, and brooms in the back. Driving it is an illegal alien—a quiet, shy woman working as a domestic for under-the-table cash, sole support of her family. Alongside her is a glistening new Porsche driven by a brilliant and wealthy neurosurgeon. Two people who have utterly different backgrounds, beliefs, personalities, languages—in every way imaginable their *characterizations* are the opposite of each other.

Suddenly, in front of them, a school bus full of children flips out of control, smashes against an underpass, bursting into flames, trapping the children inside. Now, under this terrible pressure, we’ll find out who these two people really are.

Who chooses to stop? Who chooses to drive by? Each has rationalizations for driving by. The domestic worries that if she gets
caught up in this, the police might question her, find out she’s an illegal, throw her back across the border, and her family will starve. The surgeon fears that if he’s injured and his hands burned, hands that perform miraculous microsurgeries, the lives of thousands of future patients will be lost. But let’s say they both hit the brakes and stop.

This choice gives us a clue to character, but who’s stopping to help, and who’s become too hysterical to drive any farther? Let’s say they both choose to help. This tells us more. But who chooses to help by calling for an ambulance and waiting? Who chooses to help by dashing into the burning bus? Let’s say they both rush for the bus—a choice that reveals character in even greater depth.

Now doctor and housekeeper smash windows, crawl inside the blazing bus, grab screaming children, and push them to safety. But their choices aren’t over. Soon the flames surge into a blistering inferno, skin peels from their faces. They can’t take another breath without searing their lungs. In the midst of this horror each realizes there’s only a second left to rescue one of the many children still inside. How does the doctor react? In a sudden reflex does he reach for a white child or the black child closer to him? Which way do the housekeeper’s instincts take her? Does she save the little boy? Or the little girl cowering at her feet? How does she make “Sophie’s choice”?

We may discover that deep within these utterly different characterizations is an identical humanity—both willing to give their lives in a heartbeat for strangers. Or it may turn out that the person we thought would act heroically is a coward. Or the one we thought would act cowardly is a hero. Or at rock bottom, we may discover that selfless heroism is not the limit of true character in either of them. For the unseen power of their acculturation may force each to a spontaneous choice that exposes unconscious prejudices of gender or ethnicity . . . even while they are performing acts of saintlike courage. Whichever way the scene’s written, choice under pressure will strip away the mask of characterization, we’ll peer into their inner natures and with a flash of insight grasp their true characters.
CHARACTER REVELATION

The revelation of true character in contrast or contradiction to characterization is fundamental to all fine storytelling. Life teaches this grand principle: What seems is not what is. People are not what they appear to be. A hidden nature waits concealed behind a facade of traits. No matter what they say, no matter how they comport themselves, the only way we ever come to know characters in depth is through their choices under pressure.

If we’re introduced to a character whose demeanor is “loving husband,” and by the end of the tale he’s still what he first appeared to be, a loving husband with no secrets, no unfulfilled dreams, no hidden passions, we’ll be very disappointed. When characterization and true character match, when inner life and outer appearance are, like a block of cement, of one substance, the role becomes a list of repetitious, predictable behaviors. It’s not as if such a character isn’t credible. Shallow, nondimensional people exist . . . but they are boring.

For example: What went wrong with Rambo? In FIRST BLOOD he was a compelling character—a Vietnam burnout, a loner hiking through the mountains, seeking solitude (characterization). Then a sheriff, for no reason other than wickedly high levels of testosterone, provoked him, and out came Rambo, a ruthless and unstoppable killer (true character). But once Rambo came out, he wouldn’t go back in. For the sequels, he strapped bandoliers of bullets across his oiled, pumped muscles, coiffed his locks with a red bandanna until super-hero characterization and true character merged into a figure with less dimension than a Saturday morning cartoon.

Compare that flat pattern to James Bond. Three seems to be the limit on Rambos, but there have been nearly twenty Bond films. Bond goes on and on because the world delights in the repeated revelation of a deep character that contradicts characterization. Bond enjoys playing the lounge lizard: Dressed in a tuxedo, he graces posh parties, a cocktail glass dangling from his fingertips as he chats up beautiful women. But then story pressure builds and Bond’s choices
reveal that underneath his lounge lizard exterior is a thinking man’s Rambo. This expose of witty super-hero in contradiction to playboy characterization has become a seemingly endless pleasure.

Taking the principle further: The revelation of deep character in contrast or contradiction to characterization is fundamental in major characters. Minor roles may or may not need hidden dimensions, but principals must be written in depth—they cannot be at heart what they seem to be at face.

CHARACTER ARC

Taking the principle further yet: The finest writing not only reveals true character, but arcs or changes that inner nature, for better or worse, over the course of the telling.

In THE VERDICT, protagonist Frank Galvin first appears as a Boston attorney, dressed in a three-piece suit and looking like Paul Newman . . . unfairly handsome. David Mamet’s screenplay then peels back this characterization to reveal a corrupt, bankrupt, self-destructive, irretrievable drunk who hasn’t won a case for years. Divorce and disgrace have broken his spirit. We see him searching obituaries for people who have died in automobile or industrial accidents, then going to the funerals of these unfortunates to pass out his business card to grieving relatives, hoping to drum up some insurance litigation. This sequence culminates in a rage of drunken self-loathing as he trashes his office, rips the diplomas off the walls, and smashes them before collapsing in a heap. But then comes the case.

He’s offered a medical malpractice suit to defend a woman lost in a coma. With a quick settlement, he’d make seventy thousand dollars. But as he looks at his client in her helpless state, he senses that what this case offers is not a fat, easy fee, but his last chance for salvation. He chooses to take on the Catholic Church and the political establishment, fighting not only for his client but for his own soul. With victory comes resurrection. The legal battle changes him into a sober, ethical, and excellent attorney—the kind of man he once was before he lost his will to live.
This is the play between character and structure seen throughout the history of fiction. First, the story lays out the protagonist's characterization: Home from the university for the funeral of his father, Hamlet is melancholy and confused, wishing he were dead: “Oh, that this too too solid flesh would melt...”

Second, we're soon led into the heart of the character. His true nature is revealed as he chooses to take one action over another: The ghost of Hamlet's father claims he was murdered by Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, who has now become king. Hamlet's choices expose a highly intelligent and cautious nature battling to restrain his rash, passionate immaturity. He decides to seek revenge, but not until he can prove the King's guilt: “I will speak daggers... but use none.”

Third, this deep nature is at odds with the outer countenance of the character, contrasting with it, if not contradicting it. We sense that he is not what he appears to be. He's not merely sad, sensitive, and cautious. Other qualities wait hidden beneath his persona. Hamlet: “I am but mad north-north-west; when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.”

Fourth, having exposed the character's inner nature, the story puts greater and greater pressure on him to make more and more difficult choices: Hamlet hunts for his father's killer and finds him on his knees in prayer. He could easily kill the King, but Hamlet realizes that if Claudius dies in prayer, his soul might go to heaven. So Hamlet forces himself to wait and kill Claudius when the King's soul is “as damned and black as Hell whereto it goes.”

Fifth, by the climax of the story, these choices have profoundly changed the humanity of the character: Hamlet's wars, known and unknown, come to an end. He reaches a peaceful maturity as his lively intelligence ripens into wisdom: “The rest is silence.”

**STRUCTURE AND CHARACTER FUNCTIONS**

The function of STRUCTURE is to provide progressively building pressures that force characters into more and more difficult dilemmas where they must make more and more difficult risk-taking choices and actions, grad-
ually revealing their true natures, even down to the unconscious self.

The function of CHARACTER is to bring to the story the qualities of characterization necessary to convincingly act out choices. Put simply, a character must be credible: young enough or old enough, strong or weak, worldly or naive, educated or ignorant, generous or selfish, witty or dull, in the right proportions. Each must bring to the story the combination of qualities that allows an audience to believe that the character could and would do what he does.

Structure and character are interlocked. The event structure of a story is created out of the choices that characters make under pressure and the actions they choose to take, while characters are the creatures who are revealed and changed by how they choose to act under pressure. If you change one, you change the other. If you change event design, you have also changed character; if you change deep character, you must reinvent the structure to express the character’s changed nature.

Suppose a story contains a pivotal event in which the protagonist, at serious risk, chooses to tell the truth. But the writer feels the first draft doesn’t work. While studying this scene in the rewrite, he decides that his character would lie and changes his story design by reversing that action. From one draft to the next the protagonist’s characterization remains intact—he dresses the same, works the same job, laughs at the same jokes. But in the first draft he’s an honest man. In the second, a liar. With the inversion of an event the writer creates a wholly new character.

Suppose, on the other hand, the process takes this path: The writer has a sudden insight into his protagonist’s nature, inspiring him to sketch out a radically new psychological profile, transforming an honest man into a liar. To express a wholly changed nature the writer will have to do far more than rework the character’s traits. A dark sense of humor might add texture but would
never be enough. If story stays the same, character stays the same. If the writer reinvents character, he must reinvent story. A changed character must make new choices, take different actions, and live another story—his story. Whether our instincts work through character or structure, they ultimately meet at the same place.

For this reason the phrase "character-driven story" is redundant. All stories are "character-driven." Event design and character design mirror each other. Character cannot be expressed in depth except through the design of story.

The key is appropriateness.

The relative complexity of character must be adjusted to genre. Action/Adventure and Farce demand simplicity of character because complexity would distract us from the derring-do or pratfalls indispensable to those genres. Stories of personal and inner conflict, such as Education and Redemption Plots, demand complexity of character because simplicity would rob us of the insight into human nature requisite to those genres. This is common sense. So what does "character-driven" really mean? For too many writers it means "characterization driven," tissue-thin portraiture in which the mask may be well drawn but deep character is left underdeveloped and unexpressed.

**CLIMAX AND CHARACTER**

The interlock of structure and character seems neatly symmetrical until we come to the problem of endings. A revered Hollywood axiom warns: "Movies are about their last twenty minutes." In other words, for a film to have a chance in the world, the last act and its climax must be the most satisfying experience of all. For no matter what the first ninety minutes have achieved, if the final movement fails, the film will die over its opening weekend.

Compare two films: For the first eighty minutes of BLIND DATE Kim Basinger and Bruce Willis careened through this farce, exploding laugh after laugh. But with the Act Two climax all laughter ceased, Act Three fell flat, and what should have been a hit went south. KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN, on the other hand,
opened with a tedious thirty or forty minutes, but gradually the
film drew us into deep involvement and built pace until the Story
Climax moved us as few dramas do. Audiences who were bored at
eight o'clock were elated at ten o'clock. Word-of-mouth gave the
film legs; the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences voted
William Hurt an Oscar.

Story is metaphor for life and life is lived in time. Film, there-
fore, is temporal art, not plastic art. Our cousins are not the spacial
media of painting, sculpture, architecture, or still photography, but
the temporal forms of music, dance, poetry, and song. And the first
commandment of all temporal art is: Thou shalt save the best for
last. The final movement of a ballet, the coda of a symphony, the
couplet of a sonnet, the last act and its Story Climax—these culmi-
nating moments must be the most gratifying, meaningful experi-
ences of all.

A finished screenplay represents, obviously, 100 percent of its
author’s creative labor. The vast majority of this work, 75 percent or
more of our struggles, goes into designing the interlock of deep
character to the invention and arrangement of events. The writing
of dialogue and description consumes what’s left. And of the over-
whelming effort that goes into designing story, 75 percent of that is
focused on creating the climax of the last act. The story’s ultimate
event is the writer’s ultimate task.

Gene Fowler once said that writing is easy, just a matter of
staring at the blank page until your forehead bleeds. And if any-
thing will draw blood from your forehead, it’s creating the climax
of the last act—the pinnacle and concentration of all meaning and
emotion, the fulfillment for which all else is preparation, the deci-
sive center of audience satisfaction. If this scene fails, the story
fails. Until you have created it, you don’t have a story. If you fail to
make the poetic leap to a brilliant culminating climax, all previous
scenes, characters, dialogue, and description become an elaborate
typing exercise.

Suppose you were to wake up one morning with the inspiration
to write this Story Climax: “Hero and villain pursue each other on
foot for three days and three nights across the Mojave Desert. On
the brink of dehydration, exhaustion, and delirium, a hundred miles from the nearest water, they fight it out and one kills the other.” It’s thrilling . . . until you look back at your protagonist and remember that he’s a seventy-five-year-old retired accountant, hobbled on crutches and allergic to dust. He’d turn your tragic climax into a joke. What’s worse, your agent tells you Walter Matthau wants to play him as soon as you get the ending sorted out. What do you do?

Find the page where the protagonist is introduced, on it locate the phrase of description that reads “Jake (75)”, then delete 7, insert 3. In other words, rework characterization. Deep character remains unchanged because whether Jake is thirty-five or seventy-five, he still has the will and tenacity to go to the limit in the Mojave. But you must make him credible.

In 1924 Erich von Stroheim made GREED. Its climax plays out over three days and three nights, hero and villain, across the Mojave Desert. Von Stroheim shot this sequence in the Mojave in high summer with temperatures rising to over 130 degrees Fahrenheit. He almost killed his cast and crew, but he got what he wanted: a white-on-white landscape of vast salt wastes extending to the horizon. Under the scorching sun, hero and villain, skin cracked and parched like the desert floor, grapple. In the struggle the villain grabs a rock and smashes in the skull of the hero. But as the hero dies, in his last moment of consciousness, he manages to reach up and handcuff himself to his killer. In the final image the villain collapses in the dust chained to the corpse he just killed.

GREED’s brilliant ending is created out of ultimate choices that profoundly delineate its characters. Any aspect of characterization that undermines the credibility of such an action must be sacrificed. Plot, as Aristotle noted, is more important than characterization, but story structure and true character are one phenomenon seen from two points of view. The choices that characters make from behind their outer masks simultaneously shape their inner natures and propel the story. From Oedipus Rex to Falstaff, from Anna Karenina to Lord Jim, from Zorba the Greek to Thelma and Louise, this is the character/structure dynamic of consummate storytelling.