

# HOLY SMOKES, CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT!

A topic I do so love.

Before I get into it, a quick tip. People watch. What I mean by that is talk with a friend or not so creepily listen into a conversation ... how the heck does someone do that in a non-creepy way?! Just watch how people act and interact with others. People laugh at their own jokes, trip over their words, randomly jump from one thought to another, have a tendency to talk aloud, etc. Incorporate that with your character. I'm going to hit on this later, but it matters! The little things matter!

**1: What do we want? Relatability.** When do we want it? As soon as possible I guess ... but we want it. When I say relatability, I don't mean they need to be the person next door, I mean that the challenges they face and the things they do should be relatable. Your person can be an alien from another dimension, but when his alarm clock goes off, and he has a personal struggle about whether or not he should skip work – that's what I'm looking for. I can relate to that. A character getting hangry, that's my type of character. A character that's rich, an alien, has never had to work, and is naturally good at everything, and wakes up to his alarm clock every day ready to get started, yea no. I hate him already. He's the antagonist, right?

**2. Tragedy doesn't make a story.** "Tierra, you did not just say that." Yes, I did. I love tragedy as much as the next person, maybe even a bit more. Personally, I like when everything goes right field instead of left, but even I know that too much is a bad thing. The main character should struggle, but if all they do is struggle, then it gets kinda predictable and tiring. An excellent main character, whether evil or good, should gain our appreciation and have us rooting for them. If they do nothing but fail, pass the usual amount of possible fails, then I'm done rooting for them. 'But what if I do that just so when they do succeed, it's a wonderful moment?' No. By the time they succeed, I'm not excited for them. I'm rolling my eyes and saying well it's about time they do something right. Add some personal wins, no matter how small, here and there. 100% angst with 0% soft and loveable moments won't make a story desirable. Same reason why most people get itchy about a bad ending over a semi-happy one.

**3. Milk those emotions out.** You probably think I mean something along the lines of, if the character is sad, milk it. No, not what I mean. When I say this, I mean milk your own emotions. As a writer, if you're on the verge of tears while writing a character's death, or

you're getting angry while writing an unseen betrayal, what do you think the reader will feel? The majority will feel the same as you. Why? Because they feel it in your writing. I have a short piece about a young girl having to take care of her sick sister all by herself after their parents abandoned them. While writing it, I pulled at my own heartstrings and though I never cried I was deeply saddened. When I read the story for a class, the majority cried. Sorry, not sorry but that's a success. If you don't feel an inch of emotion, then don't expect the readers to either.

#### **4. Beware of the stereotype, as well as the cliché, but let's focus on the stereotype.**

Stereotypes are like clichés, good and bad. Yes, stereotypes can be a good thing, if that's what you want. If you're doing some kind of parody, then stereotypes are your best friend, and you need to milk those suckers. Like I want the black people unable to swim, the Asians to be smart, and the white girls need their pumpkin spice latte from Starbucks. Otherwise, no. Everything I just said, don't do. Please don't do. Look up stereotypes and do the complete opposite. Stereotypical characters are annoying and predictable and just most of the time, wrong.

**5. The art of villainy.** I love villains, I always root for them. And I mean villain villains, like the Joker, Killmonger, Loki, and Magneto. Villains like Magneto and Killmonger had a purpose and they fought for something, they made you question the status quo and how things were being done. Good intentions though execution, for some, might be lacking. The Joker is just straight up an asshole (I'm talking about Heath Ledger by the way, no one likes Jared Leto). He does what he does cos he wants to piss people off. I love that. I love that there's no real motive besides making folks mad. And he doesn't sway from that, that's key.

What I'm trying to say is that not all villains have to have that old pitiful sad backstory that we're supposed to sympathize with, and that's what supposed to excuse them for killing so many people. If you're going that route, make the villain unapologetic in the long run. Make it to where people got in the way of their goal and that's why it happened. Yes, you can use the 'I want to rule the world and if you stand against me you die' route, but that's a cliché that you should approach with caution. Or just make a Cruella de Vil villain, there's nothing eviler than a person out to kill puppies and then wear them.

I think I'll actually do one of these for villains ... yea ...

**6. Overpowered, more like overrated.** No one likes an overpowered character. That's just the sad gist ... unless your Saitama, only exception. Why? Because they're boring, shocking,

right. We can guess how stuff plays out with them, they enter a fight and win. Or even better, they magically learn a skill or talent that takes everyone else years to do because they're so stinking overpowered. Even worse is when the villain is overpowered, this just puts the hero in a tight spot of, 'I can't win'. And then when they do win, as readers we sit and question everything, because how. No, but seriously, how? You brought a feather to a gun fight and won somehow.

**7. Diversity is not always good.** And before you start yelling, let me explain. As the writer, you put in the story somewhere that this character is gay, the rest of the book, his sexuality doesn't matter or come up. In fact, the writing almost seems to question it. That looks like a feeble attempt at diversity and in no way is that well-done representation. The art of representing a group in writing is not to just have them appear, it's the portrayal. The character could've been straight, and the story wouldn't have changed at all. My big rule is that if you take something out and the story doesn't change whatsoever, then guess what, you don't need it.

Am I saying that every character's unique aspects should affect the story? Well, if you're going to go through the trouble of telling me that a character is gay, then yes. In some way, this should be important. Why? Because it's the character. This isn't some bracelet that the character put on because they felt like it, this aspect makes them who they are so of course it should come up. Imagine me saying my character's a wizard yet nowhere in the story does he do wizardly things, why did I put it there? Why I did just use up two lines to tell you something that won't ever come up or make a difference in the story? Why didn't I just make him a normal guy?

**8. Uh oh, the bad boys back.** And not just the bad boy, the bitchy badass female, along with the 'I'm not here for any other reason but comic relief' guy (if you thought of Patrick then you hit the jackpot). Similar to stereotypical characters but a tad bit worse. To where even purposely doing it is annoying, 100% cliché characters should be avoided. While stereotypical characters will make us wonder if they're present for parody reasons or not, cliché makes us just think you did something wrong. The bad boy smokes and is a rebel without a cause, like at all, there's nothing he stands for ... The bitchy badass female is supposed to please us because hey she's a female, but hey she's rude for no reason whatsoever and has zero substance. And I won't even start on the comic relief character because unless they're like Sokka, then they're annoying and we hardly care for them. And no, saying they hold the group together is no longer acceptable. A dog can accomplish that and it's better to look at.

**9. Wait, they did what?** Yep, something that is completely out of character. Now, this is a bit lenient. If your character is rude and self-centered and they finally do something that's not, then why? If they did something that seems not selfish but was totally because of selfish reasons – good job. If they did something not selfish just because the plot needed it – no, just no. We start liking characters because you define their parameters. What I mean by that is take my love for villains, for example, Magneto since he's well known. He's mutant strong, all about saving mutants and putting them on top. If he ever goes out of character and suddenly puts a human before a mutant, well now I'm confused and doubting how I feel about him. Especially if it did nothing to help mutant kind, whatsoever.

**10. Give me those small details** ... when they're necessary. Your character has a liking for cheese or loves the smell of pine, in your writing tell me that. Your group of characters are sitting at a table and oddly enough your cheese loving fool strips down the sandwich and just eats the cheese. Your character is walking through the forest, and they can't help but stroll and take deep breaths, wanting to smell the pine. It calms them and reminds them that life is worth it, for that small experience. These details don't push the story, unless the villain is allergic to cheese or pine, but they develop your characters. It gives the readers fun little trivia facts about them and make them seem more whole. It makes them relatable and we can sympathize with them.

**11. She looked like \*insert unnecessarily long paragraph here\*.** This is a problem I see a lot of writers do. When you first introduce us to a character you throw the readers all the facts at once, what they look like, what their goals and ambitions are, and their thoughts and secrets. This is definitely a young adult, kinda teen writing thing. I personally will get bored halfway through and just skim and move on, this is what you don't want. Because we don't remember anything. We don't care to remember anything. When you first meet someone, do you get every detail of them right then and there? Naw. You get appearance and even then, you miss things. That birthmark, that scar, the speckles of yellow in their eyes. They have dimples. I literally just found out a few months ago that my sister has a dimple on her left cheek. She's seventeen.

Authors go about this differently, I personally don't mention things unless they are needed. Now, I know some readers like knowing how characters look immediately, so again there are different ways to do this. But no matter which way you choose, throwing a complete character sheet at us in the first moments of meeting a character is not wise.

**12. Just because I'm a secondary character doesn't mean I don't have feelings.** Yes, they aren't the main, but any good story has excellent secondary characters. Think about stories like Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, and Avatar the Last Airbender. Do you remember the Cabbage Man? Cos I sure as heck do. One thing these stories have in common is that their secondary characters (and even way more minor than that) are just as memorable as their main characters. They are there to aid and help the main character, but they also have their own lives and issues as well, giving them their personal stories. Hermione is someone without Harry, Samwise (no matter how devoted) is an interesting character even without Frodo, and Sokka and Katara have lives and stories of their own, regardless of Aang. When writing your secondary characters don't just think about their compatibility with the main, think to yourself 'if I wanted to, could I give them their own short story and it still be interesting'. If your answer is no, then that character is either minor (there to simply further the plot), needs more development, or isn't needed at all.

Like I said before, there are plenty more ways to help character development but those were just the ones I thought of immediately.