

Characters and the Choices They Make: Designing Characters to Move the Story Forward

by Clinton Gillespie (source: StoryEntertainment.com with minimal editing)

Characters are revealed through the choices they make in conflict. How they act under pressure reveals who they are. The greater the pressure, the greater the revelation.

As you design the protagonist and antagonist of your story, the power of choice seen in *the gap* is at the root of everything.

To know and understand a character and the story we must—

1. Empathize with the character,
2. Know what the character wants and want him to have it, and
3. Understand what's at stake in the story—the positive and negative values

In Stephen King's *Misery*, the antagonist, Annie Wilkes, is a powerful character whom we love, despite her flaws. Stephen King reveals why we like Annie in the text of the story itself.

Setup: Annie has forced Paul to write a new story about her favorite character, Misery. He has no choice because she has imprisoned him in her house. He decides to obey Annie out of fear until he heals from his car wreck.

At last he [Paul] said: "I'll need all the Misery books, if you've got them, because I don't have my concordance." "Of course I have them!" she said. Then: "What's a concordance?" "It's a loose-leaf binder where I have all my Misery stuff," he said, "Characters and places, mostly, but cross-indexed three or four different ways. Time-lines, historical stuff..."

He saw she was barely listening. This was the second time she'd shown not the slightest interest in a trick of the trade that would have held a class of would-be writers spellbound. The reason, he thought, was simplicity itself. Annie Wilkes was the perfect audience, a woman who loved stories without having the slightest interest in the mechanics of making them. She was the embodiment of that Victorian archetype, Constant Reader. She did not want to hear about his concordance and indices because to her *Misery* and the characters surrounding her were perfectly real. Indices meant nothing to her. If he had spoken of a village census in Little Dunthorpe, she might have shown some interest.

With this revelation, we know what Annie wants. We can then see the positive and negative values of that: she's an obsessed fan that will do everything in her power to have her favorite story and characters resurrected, even if that means imprisoning and killing the author. At the same time, however, we empathize with her because we, the readers, can relate to the comfort of familiar faces and places in a book, television series, or movie.

The choices she makes to obtain her goal reveal a dark side that we cannot love, even when we empathize with her. This gives dimension to her character and creates rich storytelling.

The Power of Choice

People don't go into a decision to try to make the wrong one or even the immoral one. People make choices believing they have no other choice. When an axe-murderer kills someone, they have rationalized that it's the best thing to do from their point-of-view, whether it's an obsession or mental illness. In life, moral/immoral, right/wrong, legal/illegal, have nothing to do with the choices we make. The axe-murderer knows it's immoral, but to him, it's a dilemma. Choices are not between what's right or wrong—**how humans should behave doesn't mean they do behave like that.**

In a story, choice is dilemma. It happens in two situations:

- a choice between irreconcilable goods where two things are desirable (of equal value) and the character wants both but can only have one, or
- a choice between the lesser of two evils (also of equal value) where the character wants neither but is forced to choose one.

Source URL: <http://www.storyentertainment.com/article.asp?id=2400>

Your Commentary & Assignment:

1. On your own paper, react to this article (6-8 sentences). With what points do you agree? Why? Do you disagree with any? Why?
2. In the short story you are going to write around the character you've created—
 - a. What does your protagonist want by the end of the story?
 - b. What is his/her primary antagonist (who wants the same thing or works to prevent your protagonist from achieving it)?
 - c. What are all the stakes in this conflict? Is there something more than just the thing your protagonist wants (above)?
 - d. What dilemmas will your protagonist face? What difficult choices will he/she have to make in order to get what he/she wants?

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