

Character Development and Alignment to Fictional and Script Writing

Throughout my lengthy journey into creative writing, I have often heard the phrase, reiterated by the author and poet, Ellen Gilchrist: "Write what you know." (Gilchrist, 2005). While I understand the sentiment, I have a problem with the reality. For example, if everyone only wrote what they knew, there would be no science fiction and fantasy narratives. There is an element of sense in the phrase, in that, even when writing a fictional character, you may lean upon 'who you know' in terms of characterisation. For instance, when characterising an old lady, you may deliberately or inadvertently include traits from older family or friends you know which add depth to the characters. This added depth is likely to provide the audience a level of believability and authenticity.

Charlie Moritz, an author and freelance scriptwriter, developed a character compass to aid in depth and complexity. At each of the compass points he suggests that we shape characters through elements of, "Gods/Archetypes ... Roles/Personas ... Ancestral/Inherited and Caricatures/Stereotypes" (Moritz, 2001). Each of these elements could be used to a greater or lesser degree to create the general structure of a character. Using this compass model, we can build non-fictional, semi-fictional and fictional characters. The primary difference in approach to each is the starting baseline. For instance, if you are writing about a non-fictional character, you will already have elements of their persona such as a sense of humour, educational level, emotional states, and age. You may also know something about their ancestry which gives you background information on their wealth, political views, family aspects, etc. Even their role will give you information to aid formation of a baseline in terms of how good they are at their job, their style of management, etc. To make a semi-fictional

character, you might take this baseline and dial up/down portions of their persona. For example, consider what would happen if you dial down the baseline and give the character a timidity trait? They would likely still look and sound like the originating non-fictional character but, because of this alteration, they may react differently when placed into a position of jeopardy or conflict, but the character is likely to keep a level of believability. When developing a fictional character, you may not start with a baseline at all, and therefore this gives you an amount of free rein in their development. You could say that this is totally free character development, but I argue that once you place the initial skeleton of your character into a role or position, the character may lose their credibility. For this reason, the character development and the situational developments in a fictional narrative need to develop in a more symbiotic manner.

If you consider the characterisation of Brian Clough in the film *Damned United*, (The Damned United, 2009), the writer Peter Morgan already had a baseline provided to him via the novel of the same name written by David Peace (2007). Peace may have shaped the initial baseline of Clough's characterisation from newspaper articles, televised news events, information from his friends and family, and maybe even information from an autobiography if one exists. Morgan may have subsequently embellished Clough's characteristics. Between them they build Clough's presence in part by the archetypal view of an outspoken, smart, ambitious, charismatic individual. If you then add into that the role of football manager, and the caricature of public perception, all at once you have the present shape of Clough. If Peace and Morgan portrayed him as per the information gathered, we may consider the portrayal as lifelike and non-fiction in nature. If, however, we assume Peace and/or Morgan have taken elements of the character and dialled them up a notch or two, we may end up with a larger-than-life character. One, which may provide a more interesting dynamic

which draws in audiences. For example, let us assume that on a scale of one to ten, Clough's level of arrogance is a six initially. We may get a reasonably lifelike portrayal, but it may lack the punch required for the film. If we dial the level of arrogance up to an eight, nine or ten, we end up with a more explosive set of scenes with other characters, but ultimately, Peace and Morgan are making a non-fictional character into a semi-fictional one. As they place Clough into specific confrontations with the other characters, the impact becomes clear. In production of my *Damned United* review, I describe one particular terse character stand-off as "a scintillating backdrop to the growing intense rivalry and jealousy Clough had for Don Revie, the previous manager of Leeds United." (Flanagan, 2020a).

While the above processes and guidance on character development ring true, as a writer, one must consider a moral and ethical element to any such output. If you take the baseline of a non-fictional character and dial the levels of persona too far, not only could this cause an issue of non-believability, but it also has the potential to end with the characters or their families objecting, leading to legal proceedings. For example, in the *Damned United* review I describe the primary protagonist as "an outspoken, smart, ambitious individual whose charisma brought him many acclaims through his tumultuous career, but alongside, also brought many detractors." (Flanagan, 2020a). While the portrayal to the audience is that of a lifelike non-fiction characterisation, in reality, there are reports of embellishment of the characters in the film. In 2012, The *Daily Record* published an article regarding one of the legal battles that ensued following the film's release. In the article, Dave Mackay, stated that "They twisted it. I'd never have done anything that was disloyal to (Clough)." (McGiven, 2012). The article also mentions a dispute brought about by Clough's family, "Mackay isn't the first to cry foul at *The Damned United*, based on David Peace's novel of the

same name. Clough's family vowed to boycott the film, fearing it would paint him as a boozy, foul-mouthed bully." (McGiven, 2012).

In 2020, the writer Sami Ibrahim, released a radio play call *Fledgling* based on a fictional seagull characterisation. As the mindset of a seagull is relatively unknown, Ibrahim, would likely have started the process of character development with a minimal baseline. He may have had a view on certain aspects of the fledgling's character, such as the persona of a young lost girl and built up from there. She is, first and foremost, a mix of role and caricature in that as a seagull, you expect certain aspects of character to surface such as her scavenging on food scraps. Layer onto that the anxiety and desperation of a little girl who has lost her father, we see the general shape appear. When placed into differing circumstances, we see further depth to her character and the emotional engagement with such a fictional, yet believable character. However, let us consider if Ibrahim altered this starting point and suggested a different persona, one of an angry old man. If we were then to take that character and place it into the situations the fledgling found herself in, we would have quickly realised that the narrative would substantially alter and therefore may not have worked at all. What this means is that, when building a fictional character, we may need to tweak the dials on specific aspects of the persona to fit the narrative, but as this is a purely fictional character, we have a much wider range of alterations we can make. We may restrict one other dynamic to the character and its believability if we cannot directly view the character in question. For example, *Fledgling* is a radio script and therefore the character cannot be seen, only heard. Because of that very restriction, Ibrahim must give the layers of the characterisation through monologue or dialogue alone. Shaun Macloughlin, author and producer of numerous radio dramas, has some good, if not obvious advice on character inclusion, "The listener will only 'see' characters if they

are described or if they are identified by speaking or being spoken to. [...] It is easy to confuse the listener by having too many characters in a scene." (MacLoughlin, 2001, p.76). *Fledgling* is primarily driven by monologue. The only time this alters is when Ibrahim introduces a level of jeopardy in the form of other birds with altered behaviours due to the lockdown situation they have all been placed in.

In conclusion, the experience of writing for publication has given me several more strings to my bow. First, in terms of character development, it has made me think more about the baseline, depth, placement and specific ways of writing dependent on the media I am writing for. The author and story consultant, Robert McKee states that, "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." (McKee, 1999, p.107). My tendency to focus on either character or story at one time must change. Second, as I consider myself of ethical character, I must ensure I consider any alterations to character creations which have a basis in actual life. Finally, during the writing and editing stages of my creative development, I will need to consider how each element may be portrayed as an outside reviewer looking in, and where we may need to tighten up my creations before eventual release into the wild.

1566 Words (Excluding Title, Footnotes and Bibliography)

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