

Building Characters Through Adversity

By John Hewitt

There are very few happy stories in the world. This is not to say that there aren't happy endings, and that there aren't happy characters, but very few stories revolve around the good things that happen to a character, and if they do, there is generally a downside to the 'good things' that happen to them. Stories are about adversity and conflict. How characters deal with adversity can create comedy, drama, romance, action, mystery and a world of other emotions and themes, but without adversity, there is no story to tell. Here are some examples of how adversity and conflict are created. Any longer work will contain most or all of these adversities.

Physical adversity: Physical adversity is death, injury, illness, and the threat of each. This, depending on the writer, is generally the most adverse situation that characters face. The death of a friend or relative, or an injury/illness that can happen to a character someone they are close too. Death is a universal theme that dates back to the very first stories ever told. The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Iliad, and The Bible all concern characters trying to deal with death.

Miscommunication and Deception: This is a classic plot complication. One character misunderstands another character or circumstance and all of the characters must deal with the consequences. Miscommunication is a classic Shakespearean theme. Romeo and Juliet die due to miscommunication. King Lear disowns his daughter because of miscommunication. MacBeth believes he is invulnerable due to miscommunication. Deception is similar to miscommunication, but it involves deliberate lies. While the three witches in MacBeth technically tell MacBeth the truth at all times, Richard III uses both miscommunication and outright lies in his rise to the throne, and he does so with malicious glee, destroying the lives around him until he himself is destroyed by his own deceptions.

Displacement: Displacement is another popular adversity that characters face; it is when a character or characters enter a local or situation in which they are uncomfortable or at odds. This can be as fanciful as Alice wandering through Wonderland, as dramatic as Trisha McFarland, lost and fighting for her life in the New England forest in Stephen King's *The Girl who Loved Tom Gordon*. It can also be as simple as sending an introvert to a party. It is important to note that the displacement works both ways. The focus of a story doesn't have to be the displaced character, but rather can be about the other characters reaction to the disruption to their lives by the displaced character.

Desire: Every character has unfulfilled wants and needs. Sometimes they are stated and sometimes they are unstated. One of the classic stories of unfulfilled desire is Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, in which most of the characters are consumed by the desire to own an almost mythical piece of art. Unfulfilled desire is as key to action novels as it is romance novels. The witches' cryptic messages ignite MacBeth and Lady Macbeth's desire for power, but it is their desire that dooms them to destruction.

Relationships: Relationship conflicts run a wide spectrum, and are not limited to human relationships; they can extend to animals, nature and environment. Relationship adversity is often the result of the previous adversities, but it is worth a separate category because this is where most resolutions are centered. A character must change the relationship, be changed (or even destroyed) by the relationship, accept the relationship or be doomed to fight the relationship (such as in the Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit*).

There are many other conflicts and types of adversity that a character can run into, but the adversity itself is not the key component of a story. The key is in how that characters react to and deal with adversity. It is difficult for the reader to care whether or not the adversity is overcome unless they care about the characters. It is equally difficult to care about characters that have no complications in their life.

A perfect example of this phenomenon is the movie Pleasantville. In that movie, two characters are transported from their modern life into a fifties era family sitcom in which everything is pleasant and perfect (Displacement). At first, the characters inside the television show have no adversity to deal with. At that point, they are not fully developed characters and their only interest to the audience is the humor of seeing these happy people through the eyes of the two modern, jaded teenagers. The presence of these two outsiders, however, eventually throws this perfect world into chaos. Soon the characters are plagued by injuries, miscommunication, and deception and especially by unfulfilled desires that grow with each new discovery. Adversity turns these people into interesting characters. The mother, the father, and the soda-shop owner become fully realized people and what happens to them matters to the audience. As happy people these characters were a joke, but in the face of adversity they become the heart and soul of the film.

The key is to use adversity as a tool for character development rather than use the characters merely to further the action. To do this, you must explore your characters. Not only do you need to develop a clear sense of what decisions they would make normally, you must develop how their thinking process changes or fails to change as a result of their actions. If a character makes the same decision two times and it does not work either time, the character has not learned. This does not mean the character has not developed, just that they have failed to change their actions as a result of their circumstances. This is as much of a character trait as a character changing their actions. A patriotic character may sacrifice themselves for their country more than once, only to be injured or to lose something important to them. They have repeated the same action, but has their reasons changed? The exploration comes in why they choose to make the same sacrifice again, if it did not help the first time. Are they more resigned to their course or do they start to waver? What thoughts lead them to repeat the same action without reward? On the other hand, a patriot might sacrifice the first time and not the second. This is a major change in thinking, and for the people reading or watching the story, the choices must not only be within character, but they must develop the character.

Accomplishing the development of character through adversity is a challenge for even the most experienced writers. The keys to accomplishing this are:

Know your characters well. The more time you spend analyzing your characters and deciding what their thinking process is, the better prepared you will be to decide how they will react to the adversities they face. For more information on developing characters see *Creating Memorable Characters*.

Decide how you want your character to change and how you want them to remain unchanged. If you know how you want your character to develop, then you can adjust your plot accordingly. This does not mean that you tailor the plot to the character. If you want the story to be about blowing up a building or developing a vaccine, then that is your plot. What you want to analyze is how your character would go about accomplishing that task, and what obstacles they would face.

Don't be afraid to change the circumstances. An idea that seemed good in the planning stage may not always work in execution. Sometimes events must happen to develop a plot but in the writing process your characters might have strayed from your original ideas for them. Take the time to work the conflict through. Sometimes the same event can take place if you change one or two minor details in a story. It is simply a matter of being creative.

Mix things up occasionally. Some actions are out of character only until a character does it. You may think that your character would act a certain way in a given situation, but sometimes want to experiment with having them do something else. People are full of contradictions, and they don't always act the way they think they act. A self-image can be a very deceptive thing.

In the best stories, plot development and character development work together. Rather than sacrificing one to develop the other, each is used to the benefit of the other. It is the proper blending of plot and characters that makes great stories work. When a great story is over, the reader should feel like the distinct way it developed could only have happened with those set of characters, yet they should find that entirely acceptable. While it is OK to think that a character should have dealt with the adversity differently, the reader our audience should not think that that character would have done it differently.

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