

## Character Contests

### Erving Goffman

A personal narrative or a dramatic scene can be thought of as a form imposed upon the chaos of life—and we are often encouraged to think of literature in this way. But in fact, as sociologists have been demonstrating for some time, such forms are already present in life itself. Because life is social, it often has many of the features of a scene played before an audience. No one has developed this view more eloquently than Erving Goffman, a sociologist who has studied the dramatic or literary aspects of ordinary human interaction.

Ordinary interaction is not always ordinary, of course, and Goffman has argued persuasively that the smooth running of society requires a rhythm of crisis and relaxation, a rhythm caused by attempts of individuals to live out the roles or characters that they have adopted in order to function within a social structure. Our characters, says Goffman, are illusions encouraged by society. Our behavior in moments of crisis or confrontation depends upon our feeling that what we do will reveal what we are. Goffman puts it this way:

And now we can begin to see character for what it is. On the one hand, it refers to what is essential and unchanging about the individual—what is characteristic of him. On the other, it refers to attributes that can be generated and destroyed in a few fateful moments.

*(Interaction Ritual, p. 238)*

Because we want to have a good character—to be known as brave or honest or faithful—we try to behave in moments of stress so as to enact our ideas of bravery, honesty, fidelity. For Goffman, one of the most interesting social moments arrives when the characters of two individuals are at stake in a contest. He describes the “character contest”—a form of life that is also a form of art—in *Interaction Ritual* as “a special form of moral game”:

These engagements occur, of course, in games and sports where opponents are balanced and marginal effort is required to win. But character contests are also found under conditions less obviously designed for contesting, subjecting us all to a stream of little losses and gains. Every day in many ways we can try to score points, and every day in many ways we can be shot down. (Perhaps a slight residue remains from each of these trials, so that the moment one individual approaches another, his manner and face may betray the consequences that have been usual for him, and subtly set the interaction off on a course that develops and terminates as it always seems to do for him.) Bargaining, threatening, promising—whether in commerce, diplomacy, warfare, card games, or personal relations—allow a contestant to pit his capacity for dissembling intentions and resources against the other's capacity to rile or cajole the secretive into readability. Whenever individuals ask for or give excuses, proffer or receive compliments, slight another or are slighted, a

1 contest of self-control can result. Similarly, the tacit little flirtations occurring between friends and between strangers produce a contest of unavailability—if usually nothing more than this. And when banter occurs or “remarks” are exchanged, someone will have out-poised another. The territories of the self have boundaries that cannot be literally patrolled. Instead, border disputes are sought out and indulged in (often with glee) as a means of establishing where one's boundaries are. And these disputes are character contests.

2 The character contest is of interest to a social scientist like Goffman because it is a place where individual actions reveal the social codes by which people judge others and themselves. As he says, “When a contest occurs over whose treatment of self and other is to prevail, each individual is engaged in providing evidence to establish a definition of himself at the expense of what can remain for the other.” Human behavior has a certain literary quality built in, as individuals play roles (dramatically) in order to define (verbally) themselves. Goffman is especially interested in what happens when human interaction is carried to the point of serious conflict. When one person offends or challenges another and neither will apologize or give in, we have what Goffman calls a “run-in,” which is an especially intense form of character contest. Such encounters, it should be emphasized, are not just about who gets to have their way but about character itself: who is seen to have acted with what the social group—and the individuals themselves—consider to be good character. This is the way he elaborates on the possibilities of the run-in:

When the run-in has occurred and the contest begun, the characterological implications of the play can unfold in different ways, and not necessarily with “zero-sum” restrictions.

3 One party can suffer a clear-cut defeat on the basis of properties of character: he proves to have been bluffing all along and is not really prepared to carry out his threatened deed; or he loses his nerve, turns tail and runs, leaving his opponent in the comfortable position of not having to demonstrate how seriously he was prepared to carry through with the contest; or he collapses as an opponent, abases himself and pleads for mercy, destroying his own status as a person of character on the tacit assumption that he will then be unworthy as an opponent and no longer qualify as a target of attack.

4 Both parties can emerge with honor and good character affirmed—an outcome carefully achieved, apparently, in most formal duels of honor, a considerable achievement since injury was also usually avoided.

5 And presumably both parties can lose, just as one party may lose while the other gains little. Thus, that ideal character contest, the “chicken run,” may end with both vehicles swerving, neither vehicle swerving, or one swerving so early as to bring great dishonor to its driver but no particular credit to the opponent.

6 Obviously, the characterological outcome of the contest is quite independent of what might be seen as the “manifest” result of the fray. An overmatched player can gamely give everything he has to his hopeless situation and then go down bravely, or proudly, or insolently, or gracefully, or with an ironic smile

on his lips.<sup>1</sup> A criminal suspect can keep his cool in the face of elaborate techniques employed by teams of police interrogators, and later receive a guilty sentence from the judge without flinching. Further, a well-matched player can grimly suffer while his opponent stoops to dishonorable but decisive techniques, in which case a duel is lost but character is won. Similarly, an individual who pits himself against a weak opponent may acquire the character of a bully through the very act of winning the match. And a bully who ties is lost indeed, as this news story from Fresno, California illustrates:

A barmaid and a bandit played a game of "chicken" with loaded pistols early yesterday and although no shots were fired, the barmaid won.

The action took place at The Bit, a proletarian beer and wine oasis on the southern fringe of town, where lovely Joan O'Higgins was on duty behind the bar.

Suddenly a towering bandit walked into the establishment, ordered a beer, flashed a small pistol and commanded Miss O'Higgins to clean out the cash register.

The barmaid placed \$11 on the bar, an amount that failed to satisfy the bandit, whose height was estimated at six feet five.

"Give me the rest," he demanded.

Barmaid O'Higgins reached into a drawer for the main money bag and the .22 caliber pistol beneath it.

She pointed the gun at the man and asked:

"Now, what do you want to do?"

The bandit, realizing that he had met his match in The Bit, blinked at the sight of the gun and left, leaving his beer and the \$11 behind.<sup>2</sup>

## FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING: ANALYZING AND WRITING CHARACTER CONTESTS

1. Goffman suggests that we make up and enact fictions about ourselves—that our real lives are penetrated by fictional concepts. Do you agree or disagree? If there are any aspects of Goffman's essay that you find difficult to understand or to accept, present them for discussion.
2. According to Goffman, when two people have a "run-in" in real life, this takes a form quite similar to a scene from a play. Does your own experience support this view? Can you recall a run-in that you have either seen or participated in yourself? Could it be reenacted as a dramatic scene? Can you describe how this might be done?

<sup>1</sup>One of the reasons unexpected rescues are employed in action stories is that only in this way can the hero be given a chance to demonstrate that even in the face of quite hopeless odds he will not cry uncle. Second leads are allowed to prove this the hard way, but are commendable in the plot.

3. Character contests involve what Goffman calls the "boundaries" or "borders" of the self. They also involve matters of "honor" or "principle." Discuss a scene from Susan Glaspell's play *Trifles* (pp. 29-39) in Goffman's terms. In what sense does that scene record a "character contest"? Are matters of honor, principle, or boundaries of the self at stake in that scene? Is there a winner or a loser?
4. Consider Kate Chopin's story "The Kiss" as a character contest. What is at stake? Who wins or loses?
5. Consider William Carlos Williams's story "The Use of Force" as a character contest. What is at stake? Who wins or loses?
6. The "run-in" is an especially dramatic form of character contest. Which of the anecdotes you studied earlier can be described as a run-in? Rewrite a personal anecdote of your own in the form of a dramatic run-in, so that a reader will have no trouble assigning gains and losses to the characters involved. Use the dramatic rather than the narrative form of presentation.
7. In the run-in between the "bandit" and the "barmaid," the bandit is described as "towering" and the barmaid as "lovely." How important to the success of the story as a story are these details?
8. Suppose the barmaid had shot and killed the bandit. Would the result make as good a story? What would be lost with respect to this event's quality as a "character contest"?
9. How important are the barmaid's exact words to the function of this episode as a little drama or character contest?
10. The following is a brief but complete newspaper item about an event similar to the run-in between bandit and barmaid:

### French Robbers Flee Barrage of Pastries

United Press International

St. Etienne, France—Two would-be robbers were driven away from a pastry shop by a hail of creme pies, cakes and pastries thrown by the 65-year-old owner, her daughter and two grandchildren, police said.

The two men armed with a tear-gas bomb and a pistol entered Armand Davier's pastry shop Sunday in the industrial city on the Loire River in southeastern France and demanded the contents of the cash box, officers said.

They ran from a fusillade of pies and cakes hurled at them by the owner, her daughter and two grandchildren, police said.

Your task is to make a complete little drama out of this, with three scenes:

1. The bandits before the raid
2. The shop before, during, and after the raid
3. The bandits after they have fled

Try to make any gains or losses of character apparent, but try also to make the scene as dramatic as possible. In other words,

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