The Lantern English Co.
The Creative Writer

Creating Living Characters – Syllabus

Course Description: While we can't promise that your characters will literally leap off of the page, this course will get them as close as possible. Learn the skills of brainstorming a unique character through everything from character "interviews" to personality types, then develop your already-existing characters with backstories, engaging voices, plot-moving motivations, and more.

Prerequisite: *Intro to Creative Writing* or equivalent writing experience.

Course Outline:

> **Week One:** Analyzing Characters
> **Week Two:** Strengths & Weaknesses
> **Week Three:** Brainstorming
> **Week Four:** Crafting a Noble Hero
> **Week Five:** Crafting a Relatable Antagonist
> **Week Six:** Crafting a Supporting Character
> **Week Seven:** Development & Motivations
> **Week Eight:** Voice

Grading Information: All assignments will be graded using *The Creative Writer Rubric* and averaged to receive a final course grade.

Creating Living Characters
Lesson One: Analyzing Characters
SAMPLE LESSON

We have all known them. Characters that leap off of the page, grab you by the hand, and won't let you go until those fateful words—*The End*. For hours of reading, they were real. They lived and breathed with us. They made us laugh; they made us cry. Their adventures were our adventures, their successes were our successes, and their failures were our failures.

Have you ever wondered how the author did it? How they so carefully, cunningly created a living character . . . and how *you* can create those characters, too? If you have, you've come to the right place! (If you haven't, consider this a head start for when you *do* start asking those questions—it'll come.)

This week, we're going to investigate what makes great characters great. Shall we begin?

THE FIRST IMPRESSION –

When I meet a new person, one of the first things I notice is their eyes. Are they blue? Brown? Eerie? Friendly? Hidden behind glasses or sunglasses? It's one of the initial elements that paint my mental picture of that person.

In the same way, there are things that I notice first about characters, and that's no mistake. Authors work hard to quickly give their reader a lasting feeling about the people populating their pages. (Of course, some very, very lucky writers are gifted enough to do it naturally, but it's that way with all branches of writing.)

Let's consider Bilbo from *The Hobbit*, one of our favorite books. The first thing we hear about Bilbo, actually, is about his home—"It was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort." Think about that for a second. What have we learned about Bilbo? He's a hobbit, of course, and he lives in a hole that isn't nasty, dirty, wet, or filled with the ends of worms. (Okay, that's from the second sentence.) We haven't heard his name yet—we haven't had a description of him—but we do have an *impression*. Bilbo is the sort of hobbit who probably wouldn't want to live in a nasty or dirty hole, and who prefers comfort.

Moving on, we learn that this hole has a "perfectly round door," a "very comfortable tunnel without smoke" (see what word keeps popping up?), and "lots of pegs for hats and coats—the hobbit was fond of visitors."

Aha! At last, Tolkien has told us something that's *actually* about Bilbo. So, he enjoys company. What else have we learned about him? He seems to like things neat and orderly, judging by his perfectly round door and his smokeless tunnel. So, you see, Tolkien gave us an impression of his main character without even telling us a name.

Start thinking about some of your favorite characters. What was the first thing you noticed about them? (Hold on to those ideas; they'll help you in your assignment.)

THE LASTING MEMORY –

Let's go back to our analogy. When I walk away from meeting someone, it's often not their eyes that I remember. It's what she said or how she said it. It's that one silly thing that I never thought was important at the time, like how that one guy nods his head to the music when he dances or how that other girl was always so quick to compliment.

We'll use a new example this time—Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*. Looking back on reading *Pride and Prejudice,* it's Lizzy's courage and intelligence that are remembered.

Memories are easier than first impressions, aren't they? After all, if a memory is truly lasting, it should be with you right now. What's the first thing you think of when you remember a character? Was he noble? Did he have a wonderful line or speech? Was he described so eloquently that you could see him in your mind's eye? Or, like Elizabeth, was he intelligent? Courageous?

However, do try to pinpoint *your* impression of the character, not someone else's. (For instance, if your Great-Aunt Stella told you that James T. Kirk is a hoodlum, try not to describe him as a hoodlum. After all, you should have your *own* impression—and, while we love our fictional Great-Aunt Stella, she's probably never seen *Star Trek*.)

THE RELATABLE TRAIT –

Here's a fascinating thing: If you were to talk to anyone for long enough, you would find something relatable about them. It could be something as "big" as your deepest, strongest-held beliefs or as "little" as tastes in soda.

It is the same with a living character. Whether she is the hero or the villain, you should be able to relate to her on some level. For instance, Sherlock Holmes and you may have the same habit of putting things in odd places. As another example, Gollum and you may both love riddles, eat raw fish, and live in caves . . . okay, maybe that last one isn't true, but you get the idea.

One thing to remember, though, is that some antagonists are made to be plain-and-simple *evil*. Think of all the stepmothers and nasty witches in classic fairytales. There's really no relating to them, unless you like to ask your mirror who's the most good-looking. (I hope you don't.) These aren't my favorite kind of antagonists, but they're out there. Heroes, on the other hand, should always be relatable on some level.

THE LESSON TAUGHT –

If you have known someone for a long time, they will have taught you something. It could have been a positive relationship or a negative one, but the outcome is still the same: You are a different person because of it.

Impacts can be minor, like introducing you to a new favorite restaurant. On the other hand, they might be massive, like teaching you to be more humble.

Great characters are no different. You have been with them through the whole book, maybe from their births, maybe to their deaths. What have they taught you? Bilbo Baggins might teach you to get out of your comfort zone; even when it's terrifying, it helps you grow. Elizabeth Bennet might teach you to stand up for myself. James T. Kirk might teach you that that leadership often means protecting your own. Sherlock Holmes might teach you that roommates are easier to find if you don't mind violin music. (Just kidding!)

Sometimes, these lessons will be hard to pinpoint. Sometimes, they will be easy to find. And, sometimes, the author will bludgeon you (figuratively) with them. If you can't identify what you have learned from a character, think about what the character learned or demonstrated that you found meaningful.

THE FAVORITE THING –

This one is fairly simple, so we won't devote too much time to it. Overall, what is your favorite thing about this character? What would you say if someone asked you to give one reason why they are your favorite? There really aren't wrong answers, so long as the trait actually describes the character. Maybe it is her sparkling sense of humor. Maybe it is how much you relate to him. The answer doesn't need to be deep, it just needs to be honest.

Got the idea? Wonderful! Now let's put it all into action.

Assignment 1: Character Analysis Part I –

This week, complete these steps:

1. Choose your favorite character from any published work of fiction.
2. Fill out the simple Character Analysis Sheet (attached with this week's lesson) for this character, carefully contemplating your answers.
3. Make sure that each response is *at least two sentences long,* using proper grammar, punctuation, and spelling.