

Good Morning everyone, this is Trevor Van Winkle, and you're listening to – Homestead on the Corner.

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Who are you?

No really, I mean it – who are you? Who. Are. You? Hello? I can't hear you...

Well of course I can't hear you (and after *Disquiet*, I really should know better than to go looking for disembodied voices on the radio). But that's beside the point. I really do want to know – who do you think you are? You might scoff, roll your eyes, and say you're *William Alexander Gruber* (insert your name for poor old Bill's).

But that's not true. Attached as you may be to it, your name is just an identifying mark, as arbitrary in the grand reckoning as the serial number on your computer. For example, if I was born female, my parents would've called me Chelsea. In another universe, there might be a up and coming podcaster named Chelsea Van Winkle trying to make her mark. Or maybe she's my evil doppelganger and is currently plotting world domination. I wish her all the best, whatever her schemes.

As an amateur student of mythology, I know only too well that names have a distinct power. But that's only because of the meaning people associate with them and their owners. On their own, without a person behind them, names have no meaning beyond semantic and linguistic heritage. "Homestead on the Corner" is a rough translation of my own name, and while I love the sound of it, it's an objectively meaningless phrase. I don't live on a homestead, and I've never lived nor worked on the corner of any street.

Okay, so you're not your name. You may dig deeper and try to describe the way you look or act, or maybe your family history. But once again, I challenge you to look beyond surfaces. On a whim, you could change your style, dye your hair, and start spending inordinate amounts of money at Hot Topic. After all, everyone's entitled to at least one goth phase. But underneath the new clothes, makeup, and many layers of disdain, you're still *you*. You may look different, act different, and even feel different

about who you are. But you're still connected to all versions of yourself, past and future, by the thin unbroken line of *self*.

Look closer, and you'll see that even the things we consider most fundamental to our identity – gender, race, class, etc. – exist largely in relationship to the culture at large. Prejudice and privilege define those dichotomies, telling one group “go out and chase your dreams!” and another “shut up and do your job.” The so-called proper roles for people are constantly shifting, tugged this way and that by the competing impulses of conservatism and liberalism – the tenants of which are also constantly shifting. What it means to be a woman, person of color, gay, disabled, or transgender in 2019 is completely different from what it meant in 1919 (and thank God for that, though we still have a *long* way to go on all counts).

Okay – socio-political tirade aside, the point I'm trying to make is that there is no inherent set of traits or personality types attached to any particular race, gender, age, sexual orientation, or other external characteristic. That kind of faulty thinking is the root of stereotypes. And while those terrible thoughtless ideas shape the way people are treated far too often, when that thinking shifts, behavior also shifts, and the way people interact changes.

Okay. You're not your name. You're not your race, gender, sexual orientation, class, ethnicity, family group, job, or appearance. But why? When you fill out your application for any kind of ID, you put all those things down on the form. How can they not be you?

The reason is at once utterly terrifying and entirely liberating. When you take an objective look at your life, you see that all of those things are external. They are outside of you. They are just what other people see, or what you let them see. It's like armor or skin: a layer of protection and covering for what's underneath. It's all very well to interact with people on that surface level on a day to day basis. You don't need to know the inner workings of the digestive system to scan groceries or serve coffee.

But we're writers. When it comes to the people we meet and the characters we create, we need to be more like doctors than grocers or baristas. When you go to the hospital with digestive troubles, you expect your doctor knows where your stomach is at the very least.

As writers and storytellers, we need to understand people from the inside out – not physically (though that’s a part of it), but mentally and emotionally. We need to think like psychologists or counselors, looking past the visible actions, behaviors, and mistakes of our characters to identify root causes – the internal strengths and weaknesses, traumas, and problems at the heart of every human being. **We need to find the deep character behind characterization.**

If you’re looking for a simple worksheet model for developing characters quickly, I’m afraid you’re in the wrong place. I’m not here to give shortcuts, but rather to provide a roadmap. I’m here to discuss what it means to develop characters that feel like real human beings, and that starts with understanding how human beings operate. And the most direct source any of us have on human nature – is ourselves.

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“But wait!” you might protest, “I don’t want to write about myself! And even if I did,” you add, panic in your voice, “I don’t even know how I work!”

If so, congratulations! You’ve identified the journey you need to take before you can start writing real characters. I know, because it’s a journey I took when I began to set my doubts aside and started writing honestly.

Ernest Hemmingway is often quoted as saying “There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.” I used to think the great American novelist was just being melodramatic, as usual. But the more I wrote and the more I came to understand my own writing, the more I realized he was right. Every story with a ring of truth comes out of you – your experiences, your doubts, your beliefs and insecurities... all of it. When you lower your defenses and put pencil to paper, what ends up on the page are bits of your soul.

But the funny thing is, the more you give, the more you get. Through writing, you gain a deeper understanding of who you are beneath the labels that have been applied to you. It’s a natural consequence of seeing your thoughts and feelings shared by characters of different genders, sexualities, ages, and creeds. You realize you are more than the box you’ve built yourself into. In the

same way that honestly participating in therapy reveals hidden traumas and insecurities, **honestly participating in the act of writing** (even if you never share it with anyone) **reveals new sides of yourself.**

Out of that budding understanding, you are able to create characters based on those facets of personality – amplifying your strengths in the protagonist, for example, but also saddling them with the flaws you know come with them. You put thoughts you’d never say out loud in the mouth of your villain, but since they are *your* thoughts, you can’t help but invest your ruthless tyrant with at least a little bit of your own humanity.

There’s a reason we mainly draw characters from the well of our own experience. It is a sad, sad truth that we are all ultimately alone on this planet. Sometimes, we show our real selves to others, but it’s often misunderstood. There are moments when we glimpse the bright and brilliant real person within our friends and family, and with some people, it seems to shine through all the time. But while we’re bound in time and restricted by the physical, we’ll never fully understand another person soul-to-soul.

The only unfiltered, firsthand source for what it’s like to be human is ourselves.

That ultimate, existential loneliness may seem depressing. But consider this: when you were a child, how often did you change your mind about what you wanted to be when you grew up? How many times did your personality shift and change because of new situations or new people, awakening parts of you were suppressed and hidden before? And here’s an even simpler question: when you dream, is it just you, or are there more people inside your mind?

We all contain multitudes, each and every one of us. It’s part of what it means to be human. What we are now is but a narrowing of the infinite potential we’re all born with. To realize this is to know that you can be anyone you chose. And out of that vastness of character, we draw characters.

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“Okay,” you might say, “So you’re saying that all real characters come out of the author. Great. Now how do I design characters for *my* story?”

I'm glad you asked, hypothetical critic in my head! Now that I've addressed my philosophical approach to character design, it's time to strap some nuts and bolts on and create a tool for understanding character. As always, I've provided a visual guide for this section at homesteadonthecorner.com/podcastextras, so follow along if you're able – but please don't take out your phone and look at it if you're in the car. Seriously, should I even have to say that?

As you may have noticed by now, I have a thing for astronomy (see "The Story Triangulum" and "Music of the Spheres.") As such, I'm calling my model for character design "Planet Character," since it resembles a cross section of most rocky planets: a large sphere with 3 progressively smaller inner layers, surrounding a small, dense core. If it helps, you can also think of it like the inside of a baseball, or as the layers of an egg.

There's a physical exterior at the top (the crust, covering, or shell), visible from the outside but incredibly thin. Beneath it is the conscious interior, in the place of the mantle, egg white, or baseball yarn. This is the realm of the waking mind: how people (and by extension, characters) generally experience the world. Beneath that is the subconscious interior, where one would find the outer core of a planet, the rubber of a baseball, or the yolk of an egg. This is the place where the illogical and instinctual rise from – the world of dreams, vision, and impulses.

But it's still not the person – **the true self**. That resides in the inner core – the cork center of a baseball – the embryonic chicken at the heart of the egg. In many ways, it is the soul of character and the seat of the true self, even deeper than the subconscious. While every other layer can be rationalized as part of the physical body or brain, this is the thing that drives the incredible thinking machine. It is what yogis and ascetics try to reach through denial of the physical body, and the thing priests and prophets try to bring into the light of God. It is the infinite potential of each and every human being, hidden beneath layer after layer of trauma, dogma, and lifestyle choice – but always there, delicate but powerful.

In story, that inner self is the source of change – the way a character can completely alter their way of thinking, living, and being without losing their identity. While the three other layers

have multiple facets and sides, the true self is a singular substance of infinite variety. As such, it can't exist in the physical, and can only be safely seen through the layers above it.

Lets break down those layers from the inside out. At the inner levels, there are fewer elements, but their importance is greater than those nearer to the surface. The first layer after the true self is the subconscious interior. These are the elements of personhood that are rarely understood or confronted consciously, and which often stem from upbringing, teaching, and environmental effects, particularly at a young age. It essentially sets the limits for the conscious mind – what your characters can and cannot understand or accept. I have identified four key elements that are vital to character design at this level: **Traumas, Unconscious Biases, Psychological/Moral Needs, and Deep Character.**

Traumas are extremely negative experience that affect a person beyond the level of the conscious, permanently scarring the individual. It's all of the things in life we never quite get over: the death of a loved one, periods of abuse or neglect, feelings of personal guilt, or witnessing something truly horrific. Trauma looks different for different people, especially when it occurs at a young age. Seemingly insignificant events can shape the course of an individual's life for decades afterwards.

A word of warning: when incorporating trauma into your characters, be sure to research its effects if you have not personally experienced it. Not only does this give your characters an added layer of realism, but more importantly, it respects those who have actually suffered such traumas.

Unconscious Biases, like traumas, often arise in childhood, created and fed mostly by the home environment. This is why racism, sexism, and bigotry are so insidious: most of the time they aren't primarily conscious. Systemic oppression thrives on unexamined biases, and with characters, it's often the source of moral need.

Speaking of which... **Psychological and Moral Needs** (terms I'm borrowing from John Truby's amazing book, *The Anatomy of Story*) are the deep, subconscious flaws that keep characters from becoming fully integrated with themselves and the world at large.

It is, as Truby calls it, “the lie the character believes.” While psychological needs influence only the individual and their happiness, moral needs reach out through the layers of character to hurt those around them.

Let’s go back to the story of dear old Bob, the compulsive liar. His moral and psychological needs both stem from a single lie: the idea that telling the truth leads to pain. This misunderstanding, while relatable, leaves him personally isolated and alone, while at the same time ruining the lives of his friends, co-workers, and lovers. But there must be a reason he believes it. Perhaps, when he was younger, he stole his dad’s car, got drunk, and totaled it. Unsure what to do, he went to one of his friends, who said that if he just told his dad the truth, he would accept his apology and forgive him. However, when Bob told his father, he flew off the handle and beat him within an inch of his life. In the emergency room later, through the haze of trauma and painkillers, Bob’s subconscious associated telling the truth with pain, and he found himself lying more and more every day.

Traumas, big and small, shape and limit the way we interact with the world. But the true self fights against that damage, trying to undo it. The true self wants to be integrated and connected with the upper layers of character and with other people, to express the fullness of its potential in the light of day. However, that physical exterior is so far from the core that it has to act through each of the layers in turn, starting with the subconscious. This is where **deep character** comes in. In Robert McKee’s *Story*, he describes “true character” as something that “can only be expressed through choice in dilemma... the greater the pressure, the truer and deeper the choice to character.”

When push comes to shove – when all the usual coping mechanisms and strategies for avoiding difficulty and change have been exhausted – the only place left to turn is deep character. This is what ultimately defines who characters are to the reader, as the true self can never fully be grasped. The decisions they make when the stakes are highest reveal who they truly are... not only to the reader, but often to themselves. This moment of revelation can be one of the most powerful parts of your narrative, because, when done correctly, it unites the reader and the character in a moment of shared epiphany.

Rising another layer up from the subconscious, we reach the **conscious interior** of the character. Now, when I say conscious, I don't just mean the intellectual mind. This layer includes emotions characters experience on a conscious level. My reason for this is very simple: while oftentimes the causes of emotions rise from the subconscious, they are felt and experienced by the characters consciously.

The same could be said for many of the different elements in the upper layers of character. The main reason I chose the metaphor of a planet is that, within the Earth, heat and energy are constantly moving, as hot liquid rock rises, cools, and sinks back towards the center to be reheated. This movement is the reason for earthquakes, volcanoes, and continental drift, and, in the same way, **impulses from the true self bubble up through the interior layers of character to influence the physical exterior. Likewise, powerful exterior experiences ripple down to the interior self.**

There are many elements to the conscious interior, and I won't be able to go into detail on all of them. I've focused on major mental and emotional traits I've observed in my own life and used in developing characters. Within the conscious interior, we find such things as **want and desire, moral code, personality, mood, worldview, self-image, education and experience, aspirations, personal history, conscious prejudices, sexual identity, and emotional state.**

Let me just make a disclaimer here and remind you that I'm not a psychologist, therapist, or counselor. This is a model for designing character, not a comprehensive picture of how human beings work. At best, it's nothing more than a metaphor, like all storytelling tools. It's useful only up to point where it stops being so, and you should feel free to adapt any part of it if it doesn't work for you or your story

All that being said, you can see how the elements of the subconscious interior, rising from the true self, then rise again to shape the conscious interior. Prejudices are amplified from unconscious biases, deep character forms the basis for self-image, sexual identity, and personality, and psychological and moral needs influence and shape wants and desires. Keep in mind, though, that something is always lost in translation. None of us

are fully in touch with our true self, or even with our subconscious – if we were, we probably wouldn't be writing, but meditating on transcendence on a mountaintop somewhere. **The further from the true self a piece of characterization is, the less likely it is to be an accurate reflection of it.**

The final layer is the one we're all most familiar with, at least when it comes to dealing with other people: the **physical exterior**. This is most likely what you picture when you think "person" – a body of a certain shape and size, the clothes on it, the style of hair and makeup, etc. But it's also a moving picture – it even has synchronized sound! **The physical exterior encapsulates everything about the way characters interact with the outside world, including but not limited to appearance, behavior, and action.**

As this is the surface of our planet/egg/baseball, it covers the widest area, but it's also the shallowest of all four layers. It's no surprise that when people engage only with the surface details of life, they're often called "skin-deep." It's not that they don't have a conscious and subconscious interior: their true self is as deep and full as anyone else's. It's that they have detached their physical exterior from who they really are. This is an important thing to keep in mind when designing characters using this model. While the true self wants to communicate itself through the layers of the interior and exterior person, these parts of character can become disengaged and dissonant, pitting the thoughts and beliefs of a person with their deep character, for example, or causing conflict between modes of behavior and inner morality.

These internal conflicts are powerful tools to make your characters feel like real, interesting people.

Most of the physical exterior falls under the category of characterization rather than true character development, and there are already hundreds of helpful tools to help develop those features (just Google "character design worksheet" and look for one that works for you). I won't go into too much detail on all the features you can include on this level besides to reiterate what I said in the Character Web lesson: **contradictions create interesting and compelling characters**, and the surface level is the one that has the most potential for contradictions.

Some of the key features of the physical interior include **Name, Race, Culture, Religious Practice, Relationships, Physicality, Speaking Style, Status or Power, Abilities and Skills, Age, Shared History or Narrative, Manners, Career or Job, Work Ethic, Wealth or Success, Gender Presentation, and Outward Appearance.**

These can all be further subdivided, and there are probably many more that I've forgotten to list. As in all levels of this tool, use your own experience, knowledge, and insights to expand or limit your list of character traits based on the needs of your narrative.

And remember – nominative determinism aside, the least important aspect of your characters is their name. Don't sweat it too much.

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Now that we've explored the Planet Character from the inside out, I have some bad news for you – almost no one writes characters this way. Not really. Not even me. I try, for sure – but even the most meticulous plotters have to let their characters live and breathe on their own in their going to be real, and oftentimes, they tend to disagree with the author about the nature of their internal reality. As writers, we gain knowledge of our character's inner workings in the same way we learn to understand our friends, family members, and lovers – from the outside in.

As you begin to craft your story, writing it word by word and praying you're choosing the right ones, your characters will begin to move and breathe. At first, it will be stilted and slow – they'll behave the way you, the creator, think they should. Sometimes they stay consistent through the narrative. Most of the time they don't. When we let the characters have their way in real time, they almost always surprise us. Sometimes it's too much, and we delete it. Most of the time, however, it's more honest and real than anything we planned. When that happens, you've discovered a crack in the physical exterior of your character: a window into the inner being of that person, perhaps all the way to the true self. By the time you've put the last word down and stepped away from your first draft, you know that your characters are not who you thought they were when you started.

That's okay! Like I said in "The Process," all writing is rewriting. Once you've discovered your character's true nature from the

outside in, you can rewrite from the inside out, finding the actions, words, and choices that seem honest and true while simultaneously cutting anything that doesn't fit. While making these edits, however, remember that all layers of character are imperfect reflections of the ones below them. If a character needs to do something contrary to their true self to show their need – let them do it!

To bring this discussion to a close, I remind you, as always, to keep character in service to story, to show rather than tell us who they are, and to be honest in everything you write. To misquote the bard, **“To thine own *characters* be true. Everything else will follow.”**

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Thank you for listening to this episode of Homestead on the Corner! Today's pseudo-philosophical musings were written and produced by Trevor Van Winkle, with music from the utterly singular character we call Ms. Lauren Baker.

Looking for hidden clues by which to understand the deep waters of the human soul? May I suggest trolling the vast ocean known as social media, where you can find me on Twitter and Instagram as [trevor_vw](#). And be sure to check out [homesteadonthecorner.com](#) for extra content, outtakes, and more info about the show. I also run a blog there, with new short stories and personal updates on the weeks between episodes.

Next episode, get ready for a new short story – which I have yet to write, so it'll be a surprise for all of us. Be sure to subscribe so you don't miss it, and please rate and review us on Apple Podcast! It really does help get this show out to more people.

Well, that's about all for now. From the Homestead on the Corner, have a great day, and keep writing.