

CHARACTERS — LIVE!

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Linear Structure of Psychological Impact and Human Behavioral Activity as it Relates to Novel Characterization: An Example/ Overview



Mind Games Characters: Conflict & Motivation

By Vicki Hinze, ©2008

The interesting thing about people is that they are interesting.

Even those most bent on being honest and loyal and dedicated and loving and true to themselves have soft-spots and someone, somewhere along the way, is going to attempt to exploit them. The exploiter might be a friend or confidant, a family member (or extended member), a business acquaintance or associate, boss or coworker, neighbor, or sometimes even a stranger.

For fiction writers, this truth about people is imperative because it is the source of conflict. Put two people together, even those who have much in

common, and their differences will emerge. Some are civil and choose not to address those differences but rather to focus on what they have in common. That's useful in fiction, too, though it lacks the intensity of course of intense conflict.

What is interesting about this isn't so much the soft spot but the method in which the exploiter attempts to exploit and the victim's reaction to the attempts.

For simplicity's sake--honestly, this could be a volume of books--there are many easy-to-spot attempts perpetuated by personality defects and flaws in the exploiter. Take for example, the Liar...

The liar will state a falsehood to damage or hurt the victim or to influence the opinions of those close to the victim (typically to make the victim look bad). S/he relies on the vulnerabilities of both the victim or those close to the victim to pull off the lie. The victim is harmed, those close are harmed, and the liar, having succeeded, celebrates his/her victory. them.

The Liar often feels elated, vindicated and even justified in lying. Often, the damage done to the victim is warranted in his/her mind, and typically the liar doesn't give much thought to the others harmed because they're not the

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targeted object. At least not at the time. Often that comes later.

The challenge with that warped thinking, however, is that it is warped. There is no justification that withstands testing, and so the conflict for the liar isn't as much in the lie as it is in keeping the truth from coming to light. Victory and elation quickly turn to doubt and then to fear. The liar must constantly be on guard to protect the lie, to do or say whatever circumstances require to keep the truth from being exposed. They're terrified of exposure--and should be because it will happen. It isn't a matter of if the lie will be exposed, but when, how and to whom.

That's a significant source of internal and external conflict. And eventually, of course, it happens. The truth comes out. (Generally speaking this is often in the middle of the book, which negates that pesky "sagging middle" syndrome because it ramps up the costs of failure to keep the truth hidden.)

The revelation doesn't end the conflict, however, it shifts it to the fallout. And that fallout is that the motivation of the liar is put to the test and exposed to all to see: victim, those close, and others who thought they knew the truth and now discover that they did not. This generates even more intense conflict--and now includes conflict between the liar and third parties who believed the lie and now know they've been betrayed.

Why? Because the motivation for lying is nearly always related to a deficiency inside the mind of the liar. A need to feel control or power or relevant. A means of self-justification, or rationalization for unjust behavior. To feel good about themselves, they must tear others down, and, when exposed, that too becomes evident to

all who choose to see it. This creates deeper, more muddled trouble for the liar. Rather than removing an obstacle it's generated new ones.

A mature and mentally healthy individual knows better than to play these mind games. But villains, in particular, haven't yet nailed this down and are prone to manifesting psychological challenges. So they often perpetuate these mind games to attempt to influence events to achieve their own desired outcome.

That isn't to say that a protagonist is perfect--perfect is deadly boring in fiction. The difference is in motivation. A hero might do the wrong thing but does wrong for the right reason--and it is rarely to benefit himself and typically for the benefit of someone who matters to him.

An example: A man went to prison for murder. He confessed to the killing and served ten years. He didn't commit the crime. His younger sister had. To protect her--and keep her out of jail--he confessed and swore her to secrecy. Villain or hero?

In this book, he was the hero. And the motivation for protecting his sister was layered on in multiple levels (physical, emotional and spiritual) so that his actions seemed totally logical, reasonable and heroic. Was she the villain? No, she had been a victim of multiple violent crimes, none of which she could sufficiently prove. Combine that frustration with the mental/emotional challenges made manifest by the actual crimes, and this victim had done the wrong thing but her reasoning was understandable to the readers. They knew what had happened to her and why she'd reacted as she had--and (this is key) they could place themselves in a similar situation and might react in the same manner.

The way the author worked the lie and the liars, the reader went from the lie to the motivations to the exposure to the fallout and then to the consequences. It was a linear path of constantly escalating, elevated tension--and very effective.

Note that it wasn't justifiable homicide, but it was understandable. Big difference.

Characters play mind games because so many people play them--which is a cue to writers that some characters will do so, too. It's also a cue to writers to remember that some people do not play mind games--and those people can actually generate the most conflict for one reason:

So many non-game players have been burned by players that they largely assume everyone plays mind games. This leads to fissures in trust, faith, confidence and belief in others and what they say and do. It raises questions--just or not, they're raised. Suspecting s/he's a victim of a mind game, the non-player is offended, naturally, and the conflict grows from there.

Mind games are effective tools in writing. If you haven't studied psychology, grab a good book on disorders from the library. Liars, manipulators, dissociative disorders, identity disorders, low self-esteem issues, abandonment, passive/aggressive behavior, obsessive behavior--the possibilities are unlimited--and interesting.

The human mind is a vast minefield the writer should eagerly explore to create complex, realistic characters--and that's no game.

The knowledge comes in handy in real-people relationships, too.❖