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Character Arcs

All about character arcs and how they should work in your story.

by   Naomi Hughes   2 years ago   55 Views ⌄

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Hey guys! So this morning, let's chat about character arcs.

7:32 AM - May 31, 2016

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A character arc is the way in which your character grows/changes during the course of the story.

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If your main character does NOT change and/or grow by the end, that's a flat character arc, & it basically invalidates your whole story.

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That's because stories are about characters. If the story doesn't impact the character by changing him/her, then what's the point of it?

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There are positive character arcs & negative ones (less common; usually work best for well-drawn villians or morally complex characters).

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Positive character arc: they start w/ a personality- or backstory-based flaw or fear. The plot forces them to face it & eventually overcome.

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In a negative character arc, they usually start out with a strong idea or goal but make darker & darker choices in pursuit of it.

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At the end of a negative character arc, they ultimately fail to face/overcome their deep flaw or fear. Anakin from Star Wars =great example.

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Character arcs should ALWAYS interact with EVERY other story element. It should affect the romance, ability to achieve external goal, etc.

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That doesn't mean character flaws should cause every plot problem. But it should play a part in how the character reacts to those problems.

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ALL main characters should have a growth arc. Most important secondary characters (especially love interests & villains) should, too.

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In the strongest character arcs, the character's goal is in direct opposition to his/her flaw or fear. They're their own worst enemy.

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A common mistake is to make characters (esp. love interests) too perfect right away. There's no room for a character arc-- nowhere to grow.

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I'll use character arcs from my own book as examples! (Because I've read them FIFTY ZILLION TIMES and someone's gonna benefit, darn it.)

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Positive character arc: Cam starts out wanting to be a doctor,
wanting to help people. She's never questioned herself as being
Good.

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But the plot introduces the bad guy, Matthew, and he's the type
of guy who justifies killing people for a "greater good."

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The plot gives Cam a choice: let a friend die to get what she
wants most (her mother resurrected), or save the friend but lose
her mom.

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She fights the choice, tries to find a 3rd option, but there isn't
one. Eventually she's forced to make her decision & choose who
she'll be.

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She does end up finding a way to save everyone, but it costs her--because she had to be willing to die for what she said she believed.

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So at the end, Cam understands that doing the "right thing" is a complex and sometimes morally gray choice, and not at all easy.

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Now for a negative character arc example: Matthew. He's a scientist, brilliant & a pacifist--until a miscalculation cost thousands of lives.

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After his costly mistake, Matthew's flaw is his deep fear of facing what he's done--so he does everything he can to reverse it.

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He makes darker & darker choices, screws w/ the space-time continuum & takes millions of lives for the "greater good" of fixing his mistake.

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Matthew ultimately fails to overcome his fear of facing his mistake & how far he's fallen from his original ideals, & he dies b/c of it.

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There you have it! Character arcs, complete with examples (and spoilers for anyone who's ever going to read my book, lol!).

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In positive character arcs, heroes are the instrument of their own salvation. In negative ones, they're the instrument of their destruction.

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"Destruction" doesn't necessarily mean "death." A negative arc
can end w/ a character rich, but lost to themselves & what they
wanted most.

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A positive character arc can be a journey from fear to courage,
from blind belief to conscious choice (that was Cam's), etc.

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Negative character arcs can start with similar flaws (fear, blind
belief, anger, etc.), but they succumb to them instead of
overcoming.

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