

STORY

Contagonist. A word you've probably never heard. But it was the starting point to our discovery of a new system of story analysis and construction nearly ten years ago.

We had a script that didn't work. Try as we might, we couldn't figure out why. So, we decided to look to other similar screenplays for inspiration. We listed our characters and compared the list to the characters in some other stories -- stories we felt were successful. There were the traditional players: the Protagonist and Antagonist, and several others that always seemed to be included: an Intellectual, an Emotional, a Skeptic, a Sidekick and a Teacher/Helper. But there was always one dramatic role that kept cropping up that didn't fall into any of the traditional categories. A loose canon.

Our inability to class this character inspired us to set about defining it despite its elusive nature. This character seemed to hinder the Protagonist, yet was not the Antagonist. It might speak against a course of action yet was not the Skeptic. It seemed to be a negative character in some stories, a positive character in others, and could be associated with either the Antagonist or the Protagonist.

We decided to call this character the Contagonist.

This, then, was the opening salvo in a war with story structure that ultimately led us to discover that structure is really on our side...that the key to a successful story is understanding structure so that we may write with it, rather than against it.

As we progressed, we realized that analyzing existing works was useful as a place to start but was ultimately limiting. "Inductive logic" helped us break apart

complete stories into some of their basic parts but when we tried to put the basic parts back together, they always came out to be the same stories with which we started. This was far too limiting and formulaic for our tastes. What we wanted was a way for us to determine a story's "basic ingredients", the fundamental building blocks of character, the DNA of motivation and plot. Heck, we wanted the answers to the Universe. And then the proverbial lightning struck.

Why.

Not What. Why.

All the time we were looking for "WHAT makes up a good story?," "WHAT are the basic ingredients needed?," "WHAT characters are required?" and we missed the most obvious question: "WHY do we tell stories?" It's seems so obvious now, but hey, we were ten years younger then. Blame it on inexperience. So we explored the reasons that things worked or didn't work.

The system of analysis and construction we ultimately developed is not based on searching stories for similarities, but rather looks at why stories exist. We found that stories spring from certain human needs that, amazingly, can be clearly delineated. We found that there are basic elements of conflict that drive characters and plot in every successful story. In a sentence, we have discovered a simple way to give any storyteller, novice or professional, all of the necessary pieces to tell a complete story.

THE BASICS

Stories exist to teach us how we can deal with problems. Alright, no big revelation there. If we look at how the human mind makes choices, we can get an idea of the necessary pieces of the puzzle and how we can go about putting that puzzle together. Characters represent the different pieces of the puzzle, so if we determine the elements needed to solve a problem, we can determine what characters are necessary for telling a story.

When the mind is presented with a problem, there are several options that are taken into consideration. We vacillate from one to another, considering every option, perspective and consequence simultaneously, slowly edging toward a decision. By the time we get to a decision, we have often lost track of our motivations completely.

BUT --

Every step of that process, if taken independently, is a clearly defined *mini-decision* involving simple choices between *TWO AND ONLY TWO* options.

The beauty of this system is that it never requires multiple choices. It mirrors the process of the mind on a step by step approach rather than all at once. This, after all, is one of the reasons why stories exist. To bring order to the decision making process of the mind and clearly illustrate the correct or incorrect nature of a decision.

THE FIRST DECISION

The first decision in resolving a problem is to decide whether or not to make a decision. This sounds obvious, which it is, but is the jumping off point for every good problem. If a decision is made -- end of problem. "NEXT!" If a decision is *not* made, well then we're off to a good story and we have the basis of our first two simple characters: The Faithful and the Skeptic.

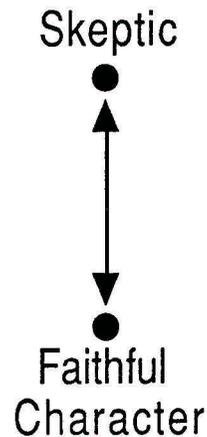
The Faithful Character represents our desire to resolve the problem.¹ On one level, it represents our desire to make the "correct" decision, illustrated by our faith in our ability to make it. On another, it represents our desire to succeed, illustrated by our pursuit of an objective. The degree to which we want the problem to be resolved is directly related to the Faithful Character, and vice versa.

The antithesis of the Faithful Character is the Skeptic.

The Skeptic represents our desire *not* to resolve the problem. On one level, it represents our desire not to make a decision, often in the form of denying that a problem even exists. This is based on the belief that there is not a "correct" decision. On another level, the Skeptic represents our desire to fail, illustrated by our avoidance of an objective. This is based on the belief that achieving one objective will exclude the possibility of achieving another. The degree to which we do not want to make a decision is directly related to the Skeptic, and vice versa.

¹ In traditional story structure, this character is called the Protagonist. Due to reasons that will be explained later, we prefer to use Faithful Character instead of Protagonist.

The more the Faithful Character tries to resolve the problem, the Skeptic tries to avoid it in equal proportions. So long as there are the two of them, they are balanced and a decision will NOT be made.



If the Faithful Character is missing, the balance will be swung in favor of the Skeptic and the solution to the problem will be inaction through denial and avoidance -- "What problem? I don't have any problems".

If the Skeptic is missing, the balance will be swung in favor of the Faithful Character and the solution to the problem will be making a decision based on acceptance of the problem and pursuit of a specific objective -- "There is a problem and I will solve it by...".

If that was all there is to solving problems then this would be a very short book. Unfortunately, we tend to avoid making unpleasant decisions as long as possible.

One way we gain time is to examine different approaches to our problems. The goal of checking out possible solutions is to see if there is a clear cut winner. If there is, making a choice is easy. If there isn't, then we try to carefully weigh the alternatives and make an "educated" guess.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO A PROBLEM

The two biggest tools the brain has to solve problems are REASON and FEELINGS. A decision can be based on what we *think* should be done. It can also come from what we *feel* should be done. Though these co-exist, reason and feelings are at constant odds for supremacy and act as justification for decisions. Not so surprising is the fact that our next two simple characters are the Intellectual and the Emotional.

The Intellectual represents our rational approach to solving the problem. On one level, it represents our use of reason to make the decision, often disregarding the emotional impact it may have on us. On another, it promotes the use of calm, premeditated behavior as the way to reach an objective. The degree to which we *think* that the problem can be solved is directly related to the Intellectual, and vice versa.

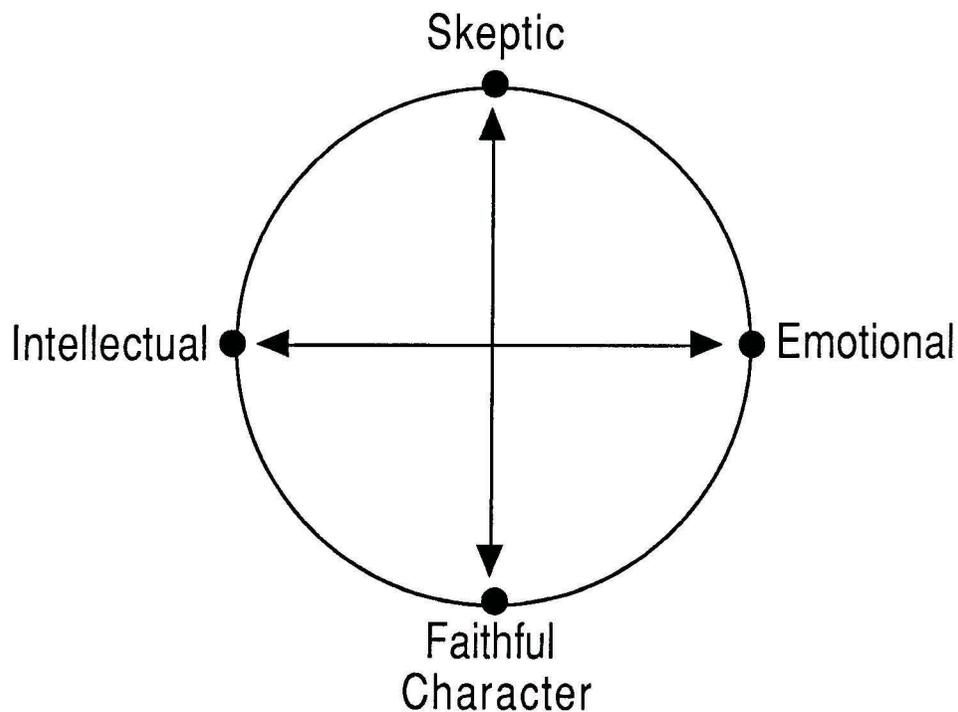
The Emotional represents our irrational approach to solving the problem. On one level, it represents our use of feelings to make the decision with complete disregard for logic. On another, it embodies the use of frenzied, uncontrolled behavior as the way to reach an objective. The degree to which we *feel* that the problem can be solved is directly related to the Emotional, and vice versa.



Conflict between the Intellectual and the Emotional stems from their two different approaches and priorities. So long as they are at odds, no satisfactory solution can be made. By definition, neither approach is better or "more correct" than the other -- just different.

THE PROTAGONIST GROUP

As mentioned in a footnote earlier, we avoid using the term *protagonist* when referring to the Faithful Character. Instead, we prefer to call the four key characters the *protagonist group*. Even though the Faithful Character is the one who must eventually make a choice and either succeed or fail in obtaining the objective, it is through the protagonist group that we explore different solutions to the problem.



The Protagonist Group

The illustration above is designed to show how the four characters balance one another. The greatest conflict occurs between opposites, whereas the least conflict occurs between neighbors. The balance between them controls the forces to resolve the conflict and the justifications for any decisions that are made. There are still more

pieces of the decision making puzzle that we haven't discussed, but this is good place to give some examples.

There are two film examples we like to use to illustrate simple characters: *Star Wars* and *The Wizard of Oz*.