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

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If I asked you to picture your favorite character, how would you describe them? Brave? Moody? Funny? Devious? Untrustworthy, but in a lovable rascal kind of way?

For most people, it's an easy question (although I seem to have a hard time picking my favorite *anything*). We feel like we know our favorite characters better than we know ourselves. They seem consistent, timeless, and well defined in a way most people don't, and yet they always seem to surprise us in the most delightful ways.

The harder question to ask is *why* they seem so well defined. It's not like they're fixed points: almost every narrative is structured around a character's transformation from one type of person to another. The gruff, selfish Rick at the beginning of Casablanca is completely different from the selfless rebel at the end of the film. Bilbo Baggins ends up going into battle (albeit with his magic ring) at the end of The Hobbit, and is so changed by his adventure that Gandalf has to say he's not the same person he dragged out of the Shire. Hamlet transforms from a timid, depressed prince to a violent avenger who fights his uncle to the death… and ultimately causes the death of most of the Danish court.

If we read the beginnings and ends of these stories out of context, we might think they're about two completely different people with the same name. And yet, in the context of a good story, the characters feel whole. They feel real and complex but still singular, rather than divided.

How? How do authors and playwrights and screenwriters create characters so compelling that we can understand these kinds of radical transformations? There are a lot of ways, and I certainly don't have my head wrapped around all of them; but one of the great techniques I've found for defining individual characters (and especially the protagonist) is the **Character Web** – the network of supporting characters in the story.

These can be simple – in a short story with only one or two characters, it's less a web than a line. And it works, because

there's only so much you can do in to explore deeper personality in short form fiction. This simplicity, however, means that the protagonist can only demonstrate one or two major character attributes.

Let me explain. Let's say you have a best friend. You've known them for a long time, but only in one very specific context – let's say, in high school. You both care for one another platonically, and so you do your best to help and support each other in any way you can. Whenever you encounter them, they're kind, generous, and helpful – a good friend, but not a very interesting character.

But your friend isn't so nice to everyone. Perhaps they have a valid reason to dislike another student. Perhaps there's a deep-seated history of hurt you don't know about. In fact, you barely even notice that other student until one day, when you're walking down the hall, you see your friend very obviously and very intentionally trip them up on their way to class. In a moment, your perception of your friend shifts. There's a shadow, a darker half, and you're suddenly curious where it came from.

But you ignore it, and your friend doesn't mention it again. Then, a few weeks later, you're invited to their house for dinner. You accept, and when you arrive at their family home, you see yet another side of their character. At school, your friend's a foul-mouthed, confident joker. At home, they're suddenly quiet, respectful, and obsequious – a total pushover. But you quickly understand why they acts that way – their parents intimidate you more than you can say, and you find yourself acting differently around them. That evening, you finally start to **empathize** with your friend – understanding why they might want to be seen as the freewheeling rebel at school, and even why they might do some of the things you don't approve of.

Do you see what happened? Through interactions with different people with different histories and sets of expectations, your imaginary friend became a three-dimensional character. They are more complex than just "the best friend" – to that other student, they might be an enemy, or even a rival. To their parents, they're a child, a sidekick – someone they can predict and control. **With each new interaction, more and more facets of a complete character are revealed.**

That's not to say your friend is necessarily two faced. It just means that different situations require different responses and modes of behavior, all of which are a part of the single, complete person. Everyone has to do things they hate sometimes in order to survive. There's a reason I chose high school for this example – everyone I know had to fake it just to get by. That's the way life is a lot of the time, and stories that honestly reflect reality should have characters just as complicated.

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From "the best friend" example, you can see how powerful the character web can be to **show** who a person is. **Telling** the reader who a character is often comes off as clumsy: especially in visual or auditory mediums. Even in writing, however, it's more effective to *show* key facets of character than to *tell* the reader who a person is. Something in us intuitively mistrusts a narrator plainly describing a person's character. This is probably because we've all learned (sometimes the hard way) to judge a person based on their actions, not their words. On the flip side, this intuition makes revealing character through action much more rewarding, both for the reader and the writer.

It is, unfortunately, also more difficult than spelling it out in the character introduction. "This is Bob. Bob is a kindhearted man, but he was hurt a long time ago. Since that day he's become a compulsive liar, but he's still trying to do the right thing."

Okay. Great for Bob. Can we move on to the actual story?

When a character steps onto the page for the first time, they're a blank slate, undefined and deadly boring. Unless you can make the reader curious about them, they probably won't even remember that character's name after they leave the narrative. So let's try something different with dear old Bob.

Say we start with Bob at a bus stop on a hot summer day. A sweet old lady approaches, and Bob gives up his seat so she can rest. She thanks him, and they strike up a conversation. The two seem to get along really well, and when the old lady asks where he's going, he says he's headed home from work. As they're talking, his phone buzzes a few times, but he says it's nothing. Her bus arrives, she wishes him well, and leaves.

As soon as she's out of sight, Bob checks his phone. It's a voicemail from his boss, furiously demanding to know where he is – he disappeared in the middle of his shift, and no one knows where he is. Bob deletes the voicemail and gets on the next bus – the Greyhound line going out of the city.

This intro to Bob does several things that flat exposition wouldn't. Most importantly, it obeys one of storytelling's strongest maxims: **show, don't tell**. Secondly, it makes Bob both endearing and intriguing to the reader. He seems like a really nice guy – why is he lying to a total stranger? And why is he running away? These questions make them interested enough to keep reading, and if you keep revealing character in this way, the series of questions and answers gives the narrative a sense of momentum even if, plot-wise, not much is really happening. Thirdly it provides a mini mystery with setup and payoff in what would probably be the opening moments of the narrative. One of the big delights of storytelling of being duped by the storyteller and then finding out the truth in a way that redefines everything that came before.

None of this would be possible without the miniature character web of **Bob, the old lady, and his boss**. The old lady brings the kindness out in Bob, but also his untruthfulness. The boss brings out his need to run away from his problems and shows what John Truby's *The Anatomy of Story* calls his **moral need** – the way his actions negatively affect others. In some way, his relationship to his boss is a **foil,** or a reflection of his relationship with the old lady – if he had to spend any extended period of time with her, she'd have probably turned on him as well.

The three different characters all fulfill different **functions** within the plot. Taking Bob as the central character around whom the web is constructed, the old lady is an **ally**, giving him encouragement on his journey and helping him towards his goal (in this case, to escape). His boss is an **enemy** who tries to keep him from moving forward towards that goal. Bob is clearly the **protagonist** – the character who's transformation (or failure to transform) will shape the plot, the types of characters he meets, and the kind of story being told.

Along the way, he'll most likely encounter one or more **antagonists** – characters who will challenge his beliefs about himself and the world, prevent him from getting what he wants,

and force him to recognize the deeper need he's trying to fulfill. The antagonist is not necessarily a villain – it's the person who "antagonizes" the main character, who confounds them and eventually leads them to the change they need, but don't necessarily want to undergo. In a romantic film, it's typically the love interest. In a buddy movie, it's the best friend. But no matter how fondly the protagonist feels about the antagonist, from an objective standpoint they're making it more difficult for them to get what they want. Anyone know someone like that?

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Now that we have those four main character functions – **protagonist, antagonist, ally, and enemy** – it's time to look at how to make them into real characters. There's no hard-fast limit to how many characters can occupy each role, and characters don't have to stay in the same role at all times. It all depends on the depth and complexity of your central idea. For a straightforward action story, it's common to limit the cast to a **single protagonist pitted against an equal but opposite antagonist** with a few allies and enemies and maybe one false-ally enemy who will turn on the protagonist in the third act. On the other hand, political dramas often feature multiple protagonists, each with their own sets of antagonists and enemies within and outside their courts. The lines will probably be very blurry: the protagonist of one plot might be the antagonist of another. A scheming politician no one trusts might turn out to be a false-enemy ally who unexpectedly saves the day. A trusted courtesan might turn out to be a traitor, and on and on… you get the idea.

One of the crucial things to remember about creating characters in the web is that contradictions and paradoxes make them interesting. Bob's personal kindness is almost completely overshadowed by his nonstop lying. Edmund Dantès is a guileless young man who transforms himself into an angel of vengeance when his life is stolen from him. The Terminator is a man and a machine, a killer who gives his life to save a child, a symbol of the apocalypse sent back in time to prevent it. Even Gilgamesh, literature's oldest hero, is a demigod haunted by the idea of mortality and the futility of his very human existence. Whether it's a contradiction between personality and belief or between

character and characterization, there should be something unique and engaging about each character in your story.

Your biggest contradictions should be the ones within your protagonist, and these should be the ones most relevant to the central idea of your story. The more fascinating the paradox within your central character, the more invested your audience will be in seeing if and how it's resolved. Just remember to find these contradictions within the story idea itself, rather than forcing them in to make the character more interesting. **Story, plot, and character are part of the same substance – an organic whole created by a single question and everything that grows out of it.** Introducing elements that aren't naturally part of the character feels like cheating, because it is.

The next biggest contradiction should be the one at the core of the antagonist. This often reflects the protagonist's main internal conflict. The antagonist typically doesn't struggle with it as much as the protagonist, but it should be there. Sometimes it's the thing that allows the protagonist to overcome them and achieve their goal, as the revelation that finally allows the protagonist to change and grow reveals the chink in their antagonist's armor. On the other hand, the best stories are the ones where the paradoxes in *both* characters find resolution at the end of their arcs: what John Truby calls a "**double reversal**".

Let's look at one example of this type of story. In *Star Wars,* Darth Vader's central conundrum is the competing demands of fatherhood and power. Luke's, meanwhile, is between his competing duties as son and warrior. In the final moments of *Return of the Jedi*, Luke throws down his weapon, declaring "I am a Jedi, like my father before me." The paradox is resolved within him – he can be a galactic protector without killing his father. Vader, at the same moment, has a different revelation – he can't hold on to the corrupting power of the dark side and truly call himself a father. Because of this, he is able to sacrifice himself, dying in peace as a complete individual and achieve apotheosis (or blue ghost status, which is pretty much the same thing).

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When writing supporting characters, there's only enough room for so much complexity. In the main ally or sidekick, there should

be some compelling contradiction that plays well as a contrast to the protagonist. The main enemy will likely also have enough to do that they become an interesting character in their own right. Smaller, one-scene characters, like the old lady in Bob's introduction, almost certainly won't have enough time to become deeply realized individuals. However, they should still have some quirk that makes them memorable and unique. For instance, maybe the old lady is a thrash metal fan on her way to a concert. Suddenly, it feels like this random person has led a long, full life, and you kind of want to hear about it. It's like meeting an interesting stranger who disappears before you can learn more. Your brain tries to fill in the blanks, and you can't stop wondering – yet another key delight of storytelling.

The main reason to give your characters dimension, however, is to reveal what lies beneath their façade. Different interactions reveal hidden depths in each character, and especially the protagonist. These links between different characters form the basis of the Character Web, and give you the ability to show your reader the complexity of the characters you create.

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I'll go more in depth on techniques for developing individual characters and character arcs in future episodes, but for now, I'd like to wrap up by examining the Character Web in one of my all-time favorite stories. If you're not driving, operating heavy machinery, riding a unicycle, or otherwise unable to use your hands, I'd recommend going to homesteadonthecorner.com/podcastextras to find a visual chart of the character web I'm about to discuss. Follow along if you can, or just use your imagination as I break down the primary character web in Victor Hugo's masterpiece: **Les Misérables**.

We first meet our protagonist **Jean Valjean** as he enters a small French town. He's turned away from inn after inn, and we learn from a Bishop's assistant that he's a recently released criminal on parole. She advises against giving him shelter, but Valjean's first **ally, Bishop Myriel** ignores her and lets him stay the night. Valjean, who's become accustomed to taking what he needs in order to survive, steals the Bishop's silver and runs off. He's quickly caught by his first **enemy,** a couple of police officers who bring him back to Myriel. To everyone's surprise (but especially

Valjean's), the Bishop tells the officers that he gave him the silver. Valjean is released, but before he goes, Myriel charges him to *become an honest man*. In that moment, he acts as both **ally and antagonist**, giving Valjean help towards what he wants (that is, personal freedom) while pushing him towards the change he doesn't know he needs yet (freedom from self).

Flash forward six years. Valjean has broken parole and taken on a new identity, becoming a successful mayor and factory owner in another small town. However, he is distracted by the appearance of **Inspector Javert,** a guard from his old prison, and unintentionally lets one of his workers, **Fantine**, get fired because she had a child out of wedlock. In many ways, she functions as a **foil, or subplot character** opposite Valjean, showing what happens when a person can't escape their past and is denied a second chance.

Javert quickly becomes Valjean's **antagonist,** trying to prove that the mayor is the escaped convict he's been looking for. He also becomes an **antagonist** for Fantine, who, in her desperation, becomes a prostitute to send money to her child, **Cosette.** Fantine, in turn, become a **secondary antagonist** for Valjean. Realizing what's happened under his watch, Valjean is forced to drastically change his idea of what being an honest man means. After Fantine's death and a confrontation where Javert learns the truth, he leaves his financial and personal success behind to adopt Cosette and care for her while going on the run. Javert swears that he will capture Veljean at any cost – he *swears by the stars….*

Let me take a brief intermission from the plot to talk about Valjean and Javert. Valjean's internal conflict (or at least one of them) is of a moral nature at war with the laws of the land. He wants to do good, but he's a criminal because of it. His original crime was stealing a loaf of bread to save a child from starvation. His conscience is at war with the law, and the law pushes him further and further into crime as he strives to do the right thing.

Javert, on the other side, is torn between his own past in poverty and crime and his ironclad belief in the absolute righteousness of the law. His obsession borders on religion, which is what makes it such a good match from Valjean's morality of grace and kindness. He cannot accept the idea that the law may be wrong to prosecute someone, no matter how much good that "criminal"

does. He hardly seems able to see any of the positive impact that Valjean has on the world around him… not until the very end.

Back to the story. Another eight years pass. Valjean and Cosette have been on the run from Javert for years, but they seem relatively safe in Paris. Meanwhile, a new group of characters spring up around the friends of the ABC Café, a student revolution looking to bring equality and justice to France. One of them, **Marius,** becomes enamored with Cosette. This makes Valjean, at first, an **enemy**, as he attempts to keep them separate out of an inability to let a now grown up Cosette go. Cosette, in turn, becomes an **antagonist** to Marius, forcing him to question the value he places on the revolution against his love for Cosette. At the same time, he's followed around by **Éponine**, a girl who's been smitten with him for years but has never been able to tell him. She was raised as Cosette's sister before Valjean adopted her, and her jealously quickly turns her into a **false-ally enemy** to Marius. She joins the uprising to keep him and Cosette from being together, intercepting information and refusing to pass it between them.

As the revolution begins, Javert infiltrates the barricade and pretends to help them, acting as a **false-ally enemy** to Marius and the other revolutionaries. His quickly found out and captured, however, and the battle in the street begins to escalate. Éponine is shot, and confesses both her love for Marius and her betrayal of Cosette. In this way, she becomes an **ally** to them both just before she dies.

When Valjean learns the truth of Marius' affections for his daughter from an intercepted note, he travels to the barricade, seemingly to warn Marius to stay away. While he's among the revolutionaries, he discovers Javert tied up and awaiting a kangaroo court verdict that will almost certainly be his death. Valjean, given the chance to kill him and finally stop running, instead lets Javert go free.

Soon, the barricade is overrun. Valjean, rather than letting Marius die, saves his life and carries him away to safety, revealing himself as a **false-enemy ally** to both Marius and Cosette. However, Javert intercepts Valjean as he escapes with the half-dead Marius on his back. He almost arrests Valjean at gunpoint, but at this point, the paradox in Javert becomes too much to bear, and he

allows Valjean to escape. Unable to accept an act of selfless kindness from a criminal and his own part in Valjean's escape, he chooses to end his own life rather than face *a world that cannot hold.*

Valjean's transformation is also completed soon afterwards, as he commits the ultimate act of selflessness: leaving Marius and his daughter to be happy together, as they could never stop running so long as he was around. Even so, they eventually learn that it was he who saved Marius' life at the barricade, and rush from their wedding to the convent where he's hiding. Dying of old age, Valjean finally finds redemption as he goes to peace with Myriel and Fantine leading the way and Cosette and Marius at his bedside.

You can see, even in this very basic sketch of the story, how the web of characters brings out different sides of Valjean's deeply conflicted and complex character. The Bishop brings the selfless side of him back to life after years in prison, while Cosette brings out the selfish side of his personality as he strives to hold on to his daughter – the only family he has in the world. Fantine brings out his sense of kindness and compassion, while Javert forces him to act like a criminal.

In a work as sprawling as *Le Mis*, most of the major side characters also have their own webs, deeply interconnected and bringing out different sides of other characters in different webs. I haven't even mentioned all the different characters in The Friends of the ABC, and the Thénardiers barely get a mention, despite having a large, complicated subplot in the book! But I think you get the idea, and this is just an example of the Character Web in action, not a literary analysis.

Here's what I hope you got from this episode: Find a few core conflicts connected to the central idea of your story, use them to craft the deep character of your protagonist, and create characters who can bring those facets to light in interesting, organic ways. Show us who they are rather than telling us, and your characters will soon find a life of their own.

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Thank you for listening to this episode of Homestead on the Corner! Today's Character (Web) study was written and produced

by Trevor Van Winkle, with music from the powerfully paradoxical Lauren Baker. If you want to read more about how characters function within a narrative, check out Robert McKee's *Story* and John Truby's *The Anatomy of Story*. Both are great resources written by people much more experience than me, so be sure to check them out.

Want to find the maddening internal contradictions in other people? Swing on by social media, where you can find me on Twitter and Instragram as trevor_vw. I already namedropped my website in this episode, but it's my show, so I'll do it again! Be sure to check out homesteadonthecorner.com for extra content, outtakes, and more info about the show.

Next week, prepare for something *spooky* – a short story about haunted caves and ghosts in the airwaves. 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.