



DYNAMIC DUO: worthy adversaries

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AGONY

Story is struggle.

AGON: "a struggle, contest, trial, competition"...the dramatic friction between your primary characters.

Reading and writing have as much in common as riding a rollercoaster and building one.

- A writer's job is to shape audience attention for maximum emotional payoff.

CONTRAST MAXIMIZES EMOTIONAL LEGIBILITY: *tacitly SHOWS rather than explicitly TELLS.*

Protagonist ≠ Hero(ine) and Antagonist ≠ Villain (morality = cultural and contextual.)

Barring mental health problems, we don't identify AS the protagonist, we identify WITH the protagonist.

Every cast creates a community dynamic. Three fundamental roles: (cf. William Flesch)

- **Cooperators:** support community by reciprocation, honoring rules & sharing resources equitably.
- **Defectors:** betray community for selfish benefit, free-riding on other's altruistic cooperation.
- **Punishers:** protect community by limiting defectors who attempt to cheat the social system.

COMEUPPANCE: We value altruism (VINDICATION) but resent spite (VINDICTIVENESS).

- **Altruistic Punishment:** paying or sacrificing to punish someone behaving unfairly. Necessary to maintain cooperation within any group made up of non-kin. (i.e. most groups)
- **Costly Signaling:** honest or difficult-to fake because it indicates the signaler can bear cost.

Hardwired protections for social groups which apply cross-culturally. Villains are free-ride defectors.

Altruism IS a costly signal. Hero(ine)s show use altruistic punishment to protect their society.

Research confirms we enjoy punishment of wrongdoing more as a promised future than present event.

ANTICIPATION, NOT OBSERVATION. The active, imaginative *waiting* is the source of pleasure.**GRACE:** *Xenia* is law of hospitality. establishes a character's **value** and **values** (both private and public).Audiences track **grace** within and between characters, as **a measure of just desserts.**

- **Heroes** honor *xenia* without fail, and helps others do likewise.
- **Villains** violate *xenia*, often and awfully. (ergo, redemption requires careful planning)
- **Antiheroes** walk the edge of *xenia*, like acrobats... they *seem* to breach *xenia* but actually don't.
- **Secondaries** waver in *xenia* (which limits empathy...cool trick to control POV! ☺)

Characters motivated by ERROR/NEED/LACK/INJURY/ABSENCE which paralyzes & imprisons energy.

- **THE VOID** *sucks* characters toward failure, sameness, blankness, vagueness, & annihilation.
- cf. Aristotle's **HAMARTIA:** *hamartanos* ("to miss a target") which is not a sin or moral failing.
- pulls folks towards sameness, blankness, vagueness, annihilation, & failure. (ENTROPY)
- the source of the character's overarching story goal and the root motivation for their action.

VOID = problematic emptiness that sucks + past origin + resonance/significance + persistent influence**Pinpoint the Void!** What gravitational absence makes each of your characters err and suffer?

- The Buddha named 3 poisons that trap people in suffering: **desire, ignorance, hate.**
- Pope Gregory I grouped the Seven Deadly Sins into 3 strains: **appetite, delusion, wrath.**
- Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa divided experience into 3 worlds: **physical, celestial, spiritual.**

Like toxicology, voids contain the seed of their own remedy/solution (i.e. use to identify GOALS).





Agony Exercise: POISON PEN

Pick your person's poison. What never stops sucking for them (e.g. dis-grace, dis-favor. a-void)?

BODY (Desire / Appetite)

MIND (Ignorance / Delusion)

SPIRIT (Hate / Wrath)

Because I constantly struggle with [VOID], I'm always trying to [ACTION] people, places, things, and ideas in every situation I face.

ENERGY

No awe, no audience.

Failure paradox: seeking out unpleasant experience. Stories teach us how to suffer in safe/virtual space.

- No problems=no satisfying resolution/growth. Art that pre-solves problems=inherently boring.

Without significant failure(s), protagonist can't develop the skills to overcome antagonist(s) & reach goal.

Characters are not people or things, but arcs of transformation revealed by high-stakes choices:

Surfaces are a trap. Energy can never exist in stasis. **CHARACTERS ARE FORCES** (not faces).

ACTIONS: Casting with strong, specific (transitive) **verbs** forces characters into conflict on every page.

- Transitive verbs give your character a clear focus. **STRONG VERB, STRONG CHARACTER**
- Each character's Action attempts to solve a persistent **Void** from past that derails happiness.
- The character Action aims for a story Goal that they believe will *fill* the Void.

TACTICS: **SYNONYMS+** Use specific & personally significant **ASPECTS** of the character's action.

- Blend **internal/external** + different directions. **ENERGY CANNOT EXIST IN STASIS.**
- **TRAJECTORY:** situate tactics along escalating curve to **STRUCTURE** via character.

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS.

RELATIONSHIPS shown by **EFFECT** characters have on each other...**NO EFFECT=NO RELATIONSHIP.**

- **REFLECTION** (boosting other's tactics): we expect this from allies, friends, caregivers.
- **REJECTION** (blocking other's tactics): we expect this from enemies, antagonists, villains.

Friction between actions/tactics turns external struggle into internal growth...and vice-versa.

CONFRONTATION: give your leads actions that directly clash: **ANTONYMS!**

- Protagonist action defines Antagonist counteraction.
- Collisions cause cracks! i.e. window on void and opportunities for grace (aka *reader empathy*)
- **DARK MIRROR:** oppositional foils of the protagonist often reveal shadow paths...road not taken.
- Every Protagonist/Antagonist impact should necessitate a tactical *escalation* the next time.

Energy Exercise: ADD VERBS

What core behavior defines your protagonist? What strategic *re*-actions make up the range of tactics they employ during their story which will show different facets of their action?

ACTION:

TACTICS:





DRIVE: *Deinos*="wondrous, terrible, weird, dangerous, powerful, clever, skilled, savage...EXCEPTIONAL."

- word used by ancient Greeks to describe all great protagonists. (cf *deino-saurs*)
- Protagonists = **awesome and awful**...Positives & negatives which cannot be separated.
- Secondaries (who lack *deinos*) beg protagonist to act normal...unsuccessfully. (*Reinforce world*.)

Focus on **intention not backstory**, so characters must take meaningful action at every stage.

PROTAGONIST: the driving force within the story which creates meaningful transformation in its world.

- "Multiple" protagonists usually means **no effective protagonist**.
- a protagonist battles their Void (from monsters to malaise) via action.

The struggle (Agon) is the result of characters DOING things that impact each other irrevocably.

One protagonist/antagonist per story; only a few books tell multiple stories. **Be you ware of complication!**

ANTAGONISTS are inherently oppositional...*contrary* efforts intended to thwart/counter primary action.

- Must start out stronger than your Protagonist; they do not change but they may **adapt**.
- Keep **absent** as much as possible to amplify their threat. Let audience imagination do the work
- Many stories deploy multiple antagonists, but each complicates. Better clear than clever.

Protagonists pay attention to what matters (and earn our **attention** thereby).

- ...have the strongest needs, hardest choices, worst conflicts, biggest emotional journey
- **ISOLATION** (int/ext) highlights their emotional truth and personal struggle/growth.

Antagonists steal attention from what matters (and increase **tension** thereby).

- ...prefer easy path, quick fixes, unlearned lessons, fiercest resistance to growth/transformation.
- **ACCESS** (int/ext) imposes meaningful friction and significant costs upon the Protagonist.

Energy Exercise: COUNTER MEASURE

Instead of moralizing your antagonist, focus the HOW/WHY/WHO of antagonist opposition.

HOW? In what specific ways will they thwart/sabotage/derail your protagonist at pivotal points?

WHY? Specify the justification they'd use to excuse being such a persistent problem.

WHO... do they think they are, anyways?! Explain their internal self-image in logical positives.

BONUS ROUND: Come up with 3-5 antonyms of your protag's action as a possible action for your antagonist (i.e. a consistent behavior that defines them). What will they DO throughout their story?

PARITY

No effect, no relationship.

RELENTLESS NECESSITY: Protagonists must take action. Antagonists must oppose it (*agon-y*)

Pivotal characters will risk (anyone's) destruction to achieve their goals...connected at core by struggle.

NEGATIVES UNDERMINE, POSITIVES UNDERLINE.

Protagonists **drive the story** via their action (and tactics). They often embody reader ambitions.

- Protag trap: perfection + paragons...because this makes them unrealistic and unappealing.
- Crux is not likability, but **ACCESSIBILITY**. (*Invite your audience to the party!*)

Antagonists **block the story**, for good or ill. (need their own void/goal). They often embody reader fears.

- Antag trap: iniquity + illogic...because they'll become cartoony and unbelievable.
- Crux is not repulsion but **FASCINATION**. (*Set the bait and lay the trap!*)





Two conflict types: ROLE (based on perceptions) or GOAL (caused by pursuit of objectives)

- ROLE: Roles are relational...how characters place themselves and vice versa. Roles EVOLVE.
Traps: cultural bias, stereotyping, clichés, pettiness, TSTL (**so defy expectations!**)
- GOAL: Goals are time-dependent because they are subjunctive and conditional. Goals EXPIRE.
Traps: abstract vaguery, logic leaps, info dumping, backstory swamp (**so amplify stakes!**)

Beware of tearing the story's fabric...DISBELIEF IS YOUR KRYPTONITE.

PAIR VOIDS FOR MAXIMUM CHEMISTRY so they intersect on page in a cocktail of choices + voices.

- OBSTACLES & OPPONENTS: how do other characters exacerbate/alleviate the void?

Parity Exercise: TRUE COLORS

Look on the bright side! Identify positive/admirable traits for your protagonist + antagonist(s). Pinpoint their core values by writing 5 sentences for each starting with the phrase "I always..."

- Focus on the character's central behaviors and beliefs (as opposed to routines or habits).
- Aim for positives (*always* rather than *never*) and topics that matter a great deal to this character.
- No negatives. Rephrase "*I can't _____*," as "*I can only _____ when _____*."

BONUS: articulate this character's personal motto *in their voice*. What do they believe they believe?

CLARITY

Write makes right.

NEMESIS: originally a Greek goddess of PROPORTION...name translates as "distribution."

- acted as neutral dispenser of deserved, appropriate fortune based on people's actions.
- Now...an unbeatable, unavoidable rival. (aka a *sparkly comeuppance anticipation fountain*)

VALENCE: which story are you telling and to whom?

- Protagonist + Antagonist...determine story focus because they're the source of struggle (*agon*).
- Hero(ine) + Villain...created by story morality so they help delineate the story's world & context.

HEROISM challenges audience's excuses & self-imposed limitations: great deeds, determination, tenacity

VILLAINY threatens audience's complacency & comfortable illusions: selfish exploits, spite, amorality

99% morality is contextual & socially constructed. (decoded via *XENIA* as universal metric)

- All heroes fight their void. All villains are their heroes' voids made visible.

Secret gift of Hero(ine)s: **PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION** . Villains *lack* this capacity.

WORLDBUILDING: every book must establish its own ethical limits and boundaries.

- Whatever your ethical framework, it must be legible at first read. (With *xenia* as universal key.)

SENTIMENTALITY: only 1 interpretation...Don't write your own background music. **Beware absolutes.**

- perfection/overcompetence or monstrosity/noncompetence kills agency & authenticity.

Only heroes and villains have the power to change the world.

When looking at heroes and villains, ask yourself: **HOW** and **WHY** could they change the world?

MORAL EVENT HORIZON: ethical boundary placing one **beyond redemption**. (Know the story's limit.)

We know that **Fairness is a fiction**. Successful stories signal comeuppance so we *get* to anticipate.

"You are only as strong as your enemy." Crazy Horse





DYNAMICS: Characters are their actions, threads of energy woven through a story together.

- Each character serves the interplay between cast. They cannot exist alone or in a vacuum.
- Treating characters as isolated individuals blunts their impact and import (and cripples clarity).

EACH THREAD HAS REPERCUSSIONS OR WE DON'T CARE.

What Heroes/Villains are *yours* alone? How do your protagonists/antagonists differ from everyone else's?

Main characters only surpass regurgitation/repackaging if you WRITE them. (Straw dummies suck.)

- TRACING IS A TRAP! We learn by mimicry; we stop learning, *ditto*. (READING ≠ WRITING)
- Please don't recycle. Give your readers and genre the main characters they deserve.

Clarity Exercise: DUO DYNAMICS

Look at the push/pull that keeps two pivotal characters so connected. How do their actions attract, repel, and affect each other? Why do they need, avoid, and impact each other so *much*?

	CHARACTERS ↔	
	← NEED →	
	← AVOID →	
	← IMPACT →	

Extra Exercises:

DARK SIDE: Write an alternative blurb/synopsis turning your protagonist into the antagonist.

FLIP OUT: Flip their gender, class, race, age, orientation, skill, politics, beliefs, candor, morality.

SWAP MEAT: Pretend this story just got optioned by a pushy producer who wants to change everything about your duo. What changes wouldn't harm the story? What are the dealbreakers?

Recommended Reading:

William Flesch - *Comeuppance: Costly Signaling, Altruistic Punishment, and Other Biological ...*

Constance Hale - *Vex, Hex, Smash, Smooch: Let Verbs Power Your Writing*

James A. W. Heffernan - *Hospitality and Treachery in Western Literature*

Donald Maas - *The Emotional Craft of Fiction: How to Write the Story Beneath the Surface*

Mary L. Mercer - *The One Hour Guide to Better Antagonists: How to Write Stronger Stories Using ...*

Jessica Morrell - *Bullies, Bastards, and Bitches: How to Write the Bad Guys of Fiction*

Roz Morris - *Writing Characters Who'll Keep Readers Captivated (Nail Your Novel)*

Anatol Rapoport - *Fights, Games, and Debates*

Damon Suede - *Verbalize: bring stories to life & life to stories* and *Activate: a thesaurus of actions...*

K.M. Weiland - *Creating Character Arcs: the masterful author's guide to uniting story structure...*

"By exploring the darkness, you explore the light." Hubert Selby, Jr.

