

# Writing the Short Story: How to Create a Dynamic Character Profile

*by Diana J Heath*



Story world characters deserve our full attention as they are the active agents who drive a story's plot forward. Whatever their role in a narrative, characters give us a front row seat for all the action. They are the eyes and ears of the story-world, and it is through their narration that we experience the story world. We love characters, whether we are reading about them in a book or watching them on television or in a film.

## The narrative function of characters

Most stories are usually centred around the hero, so the secondary characters such as the villain, the princess and the helper, function as an extension of the hero's universe. The villain opposes the hero. The princess needs rescuing. The helper provides much-needed help and support for the hero.

## A brief overview of the history of archetypal characters and their narrative functions

In any kind of story, the narrative consists of seven archetypal characters as outlined by the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp in his extensive study of Russian folk and fairy tales.



Here are Propp's conclusions:



1. Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.
2. The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.
3. The sequence of functions is always identical.
4. All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure. \* The hero accepts a call to go on a quest, he experiences conflict from a villain. The hero receives some magical help along his journey, meets some helpers who join his quest, and he encounters a princess who needs rescuing.

\* Propp in Turner 1988, p. 69.

## Here are the seven archetypes as identified by Propp:

- The hero
- The false hero
- The donor (or provider)
- The helper/s
- The princess (or sought after person) (sometimes accompanied by her father)
- The dispatcher (the person who sends the hero on his journey)
- The villain

### Analysing archetypal characters

In order to analyse the above archetypal characters, I am going to use the entertainment medium of film-making to predominately draw my examples from. Of course there are many great examples in literature, but I think film-making has a greater potential for global story saturation. And most of us are familiar with film references anyway. To identify Propp's archetypal characters in a modern setting, I am going to use the main cast from the Star Wars saga.



The hero - Luke Skywalker

The false hero - Darth Vader

The donor - Obiwan Kenobi

The helper/s - Han Solo and Chewbacca/C3PO

The princess - Princess Leia

The dispatcher - R2D2

The villain - Darth Vader

**To demonstrate how to create a dynamic character profile, I am going to pick the false hero, and the princess.**

From the Star Wars franchise we have seen the development of the Darth Vader character, from the conflicted and misguided 'false hero' Anakin Skywalker, to his evolution as the villain. As a little boy, he was innocent and sweet, and had a tragic life, and we felt for him, and we looked forward to his bright future as a light sabre extraordinaire - the Jedi Knight. But alas, we were very much mistaken, or at least

some of us tried to be shocked and dismayed at Anakin's descent into darkness, after the considerable gap between the original and more recent Star Wars films. But Anakin was the false hero and it was his son, Luke, who would be the real hero.

## What is your view here? Do you think it is possible to have two heroes in a narrative?

Another example of a false hero can be drawn from the well-known classic story that has also made a billion-dollar crossover to a filmic franchise -The Lord of the Rings. Who is the false hero in this narrative? You may not agree, but I reckon it is Gollum.



Before he became the wretched and ring-obsessed pathetic creature Gollum, Smeagol was just a normal hobbit who had discovered a magic ring, not dissimilar to Bilbo and Frodo. But once the ring had consumed him with evil, he became a false hero, and in some ways a villain as well. Of course he could have been the hero of the story, like Frodo, but his choice relegated him to the role of the false hero.

Just like the real hero, the false hero will have a journey to take and a choice to make. But he will falter in his journey, therefore allowing the real hero to step up. Sometimes the false hero is used as a 'red herring' or as a clever narrative device to misguide the reader or viewer, and to keep them guessing.

## The Princess

The 'princess' character is of great significance to me. During my university journey I submitted a thesis/creative project that analysed the true purpose behind many fairy tales, in particular, the Brothers Grimm tales. My discovery was that many well-known fairy tales were originally designed as literary commentaries on social-political issues at the time of their creation.

After reading many fairy tales, I discovered that the princess was predominately traditionally represented as a passive female character who finds herself either trapped in a tower, poisoned by an evil witch or a victim of a deadly curse. But in modern-day narratives, we see that many female characters, especially in film, are designed to defy traditional audience expectations of gender roles.



In books, films and video games, we are now encountering female characters who are not always reliant on being rescued by a prince, and many times, they dominate much of the action on screen. Think Charlie's Angels or Kill Bill or Tomb Raider.

## Character profiles of the princess in traditional fairy tales

### The damsel in distress

In this representation, the hero sets out on his quest, and encounters a damsel/princess in distress. He rescues her from an evil witch, who has either kept her captive in a tower or has cast a spell that causes the hapless princess to sleep for a hundred years.

### The sought after princess

In many fairy tale representations a conflicted princess is also the instigator of the hero's quest. Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess who could only be rescued from her entrapment by a young, rich and good-looking prince. After many battles with an evil nemesis, they ultimately receive their 'happily ever after' ending.

### The rebellious and sacrificial princess

The magical world of Walt Disney has filled our imaginations all over again with some ground-breaking examples of rebellious and sacrificial princesses. The love-struck mermaid, Ariel, who disobeys her father, King Triton, in *The Little Mermaid*, which was originally penned by Hans Christian Andersen. And also Princess Jasmine in *Aladdin*.



### The Bold and the Brave Princess

In the French fairy tale 'The Beauty and the Beast', the pure-in-heart Beauty or Belle sets out to rescue her father from a terrifying Beast who lives in a cursed castle. And of course we know the end of the story - Beauty's magical tears transform the Beast back into his true self - a prince. A great example of an active fairy tale princess considering it was originally constructed in the 1800s.

## The character profile of the princess in modern day narratives

### The princess in a romantic comedy

The princess in many Hollywood rom-com's is usually the principal love interest who is pursued by her admirer or a love-struck hero. There are challenges to their love, or the princess continually rejects the hero until he finally wins her over. Ultimately they receive their happy ending.

### The Princess-Heroine

The princess is a passive recipient of tragedy or some type of injustice, but she rises to the challenge, either by herself, or she joins with the hero - like a crime fighting team. In this representation, the princess becomes the heroine. Think:

Cinderella/Drew Barrymore in Ever After or Batgirl/Alicia Silverstone in Batman and Robin.

Radical shifts in female characterisation provide the archetypal princess with an opportunity to take control of the narrative and embark on a quest to free herself from cultural and socio-political dis-empowerment, or from nasty aliens that have acid for blood. A good example would be Ripley in the Alien film franchise, especially the first two films. Ripley was the last woman standing among all the well trained gun-toting marines, and she was transformed into an almost indestructible fighting machine. She is considered to be a ground-breaking character for women in film.

The Hunger Games heroine, Katniss Everdeen, has become an iconic symbol of bravery and courage for young women. She is a prime example of how one person can stand up against injustice and inspire others to do the same.

These modern-day story character profiles show the shift from traditional representations of the archetypal entrapped princess to a dynamic active character in the story world. Of course that does not mean that the prince-hero is dis-empowered, but both the prince-hero and the princess-heroine play an important role in fictional storytelling.

However you choose to represent your characters, by learning the history of archetypal characterisation and the functions of different characters, you can create a dynamic character profile that will engage your reader.

Happy writing!

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Reference:

Turner, Graeme 1988 'Film Narrative', Film as Social Practice, Routledge, London.

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