MODERN PROMETHEUS: BREATHING LIFE INTO YOUR CHARACTERS.

Writing workshop.

You will need a notebook or pen and paper.

CREATING YOUR CHARACTER

"Characters pre-exist. They are found. They reveal themselves slowly – as might a fellow traveller seated opposite one in a very dimly lit railway carriage." Elizabeth Bowen.

Autobiographical

You can create a multitude of characters from your own consciousness, using aspects of yourself in their creation.

Other people

Observe people you know. Combine the traits of different people.

Research historical figures.

From scratch

CREATING FROM SCRATCH

Using a photo as inspiration, jot down some information about your character, letting your imagination fill in what you cannot see.

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Occupation:
4. Education:
5. Family/Friends:
6. Tattoos:
7. Scars:
8. Strengths/Talents:
9. Weaknesses:
10. Notable events/milestones:
11. Criminal record:
12. Skeletons in the closet:

CREATING FROM SCRATCH

What does your character own? Choose 8+ items and note them down.

Do these things reveal something about them?

Using the objects you've chosen, decide whether their owner is:

- Calm or excitable?
- Introvert/Extrovert?
- Reflective (thoughts/inner monologues) or active?
- Intelligent?

What is/are their:

- Hobbies/Interests?
- Moral code?
- Phobias/Fears?
- Flaws?
- Quirks?
- Favourite sayings?

You will be using the character you created throughout the rest of this workshop.

EXERCISE:

Sketch a quick character portrait (no more than 100 words) describing your character's physical attributes.

Think about:

- How much you need to tell the reader.
- Will you trust the reader to fill in the other details?

"As she dialled the number, I noticed that her finger-nails were painted emerald green, a colour unfortunately chosen, for it called attention to her hands, which were much stained by cigarette-smoking and as dirty as a little girl's. She was dark enough to be Fritz's sister. Her face was long and thin, powdered dead white. She had very large brown eyes which should have been darker, to match her hair and the pencil she used for her eyebrows."

Christopher Isherwood: *Goodbye to Berlin.*

PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES

Does the reader need to know eye colour?

Do they want to know exactly what each character wears?

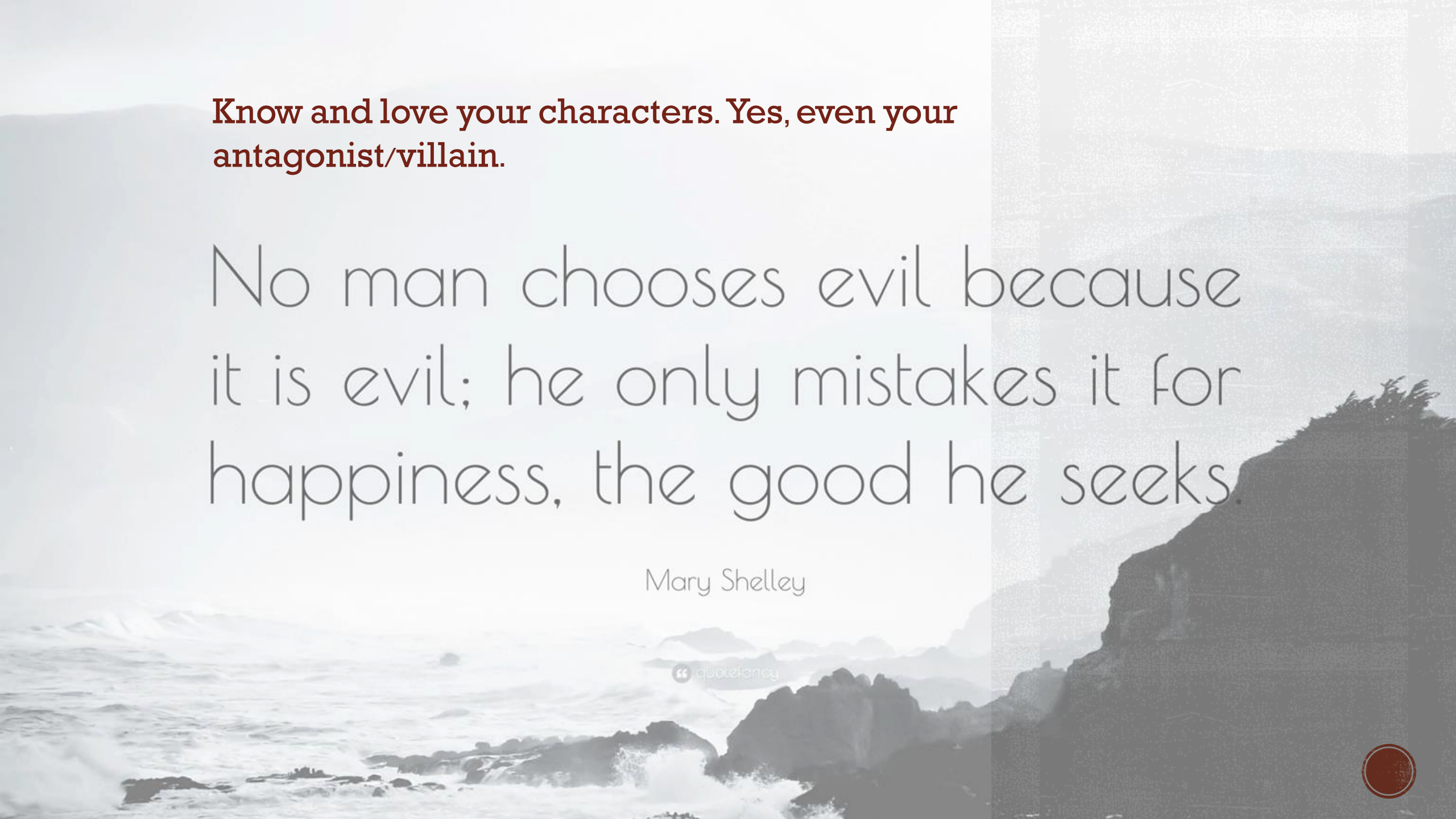
Or are they more interested in what your characters do and say?

Reveal characters through their actions!

- **What** do they do? **How** do they do it?
- Look for the **motivation** behind the action.
- **Why** do they do it in that **particular way**?
- How will they negotiate an obstacle or problem?
- How will they react to compromise or an incentive?
- What will please or offend them?

A character “is real when the novelist knows everything about it. He may not choose to tell us all he knows – many of the facts, even of the kind we call obvious, may be hidden. But he will give us the feeling that though the character has not been explained it is explicable.” E.M. Forster

Know and love your characters. Yes, even your antagonist/villain.



- **Five-minute exercise:**

- Your character returns to their hometown after four years and learns that the person they love is in an unhappy marriage.

- **What** do they do?
- **How** do they do it?
- **Why** do they do it in that **particular way**?
- What is their **motivation** behind the action?

SHOWING & TELLING

What method will you use to reveal your character?

Does the reader have access to their inner thoughts? (REFLECTION/DEEP POV)

Are their thoughts and motivations revealed through action? (ACTION)

What are the strengths and weaknesses of each method?

SHOWING & TELLING

Revealing character through action.

- Emotional moments can be more impactful when shown rather than told.
- Pinpoint an emotionally significant moment in your story – ideally when the main character changes in some way – and silence their inner monologue.
- Use only action and dialogue to reveal this internal change to the reader.

If your story includes very little inner monologue, you can try to reverse this process (if your narrative allows).

Switching between reflection and action and back again, may reveal more about the character than one of these alone, and is likely to make your story feel more dynamic.

BREATHING LIFE INTO YOUR CHARACTERS

History/Backstory/
Trauma

BREADCRUMB TRAIL

- **Scatter hints**/references to the traumatic event throughout the narrative. Oblique references that read naturally tend to be more effective. Avoid info dumps or being too specific.

- **Past trauma** – how does it affect your character **now**? Use current behaviour to hint at past trauma. Examples: avoidance, self-doubt, overreactions or underreactions, triggers, denial and shame, obsessions, regression, dissociation, projection, etc.

- Further reading: Ackerman and Puglisi - *The Emotional Wound Thesaurus*

THE PAST IS WRITTEN ON THEIR FLESH

- Is your character's history inscribed on their body?
  - scars
  - stretch marks
  - wrinkles (laughter or frown lines?)
  - missing teeth.

Is your character happy or unhappy in their own skin?

Do they intentionally draw attention to one or more of their physical attributes?

Do they try to conceal it/them?

LOGICAL INCONSISTENCY

Aristotle's **"consistent inconsistencies"**

Contradictions produce internal conflict.

Character is X but Y: ➡

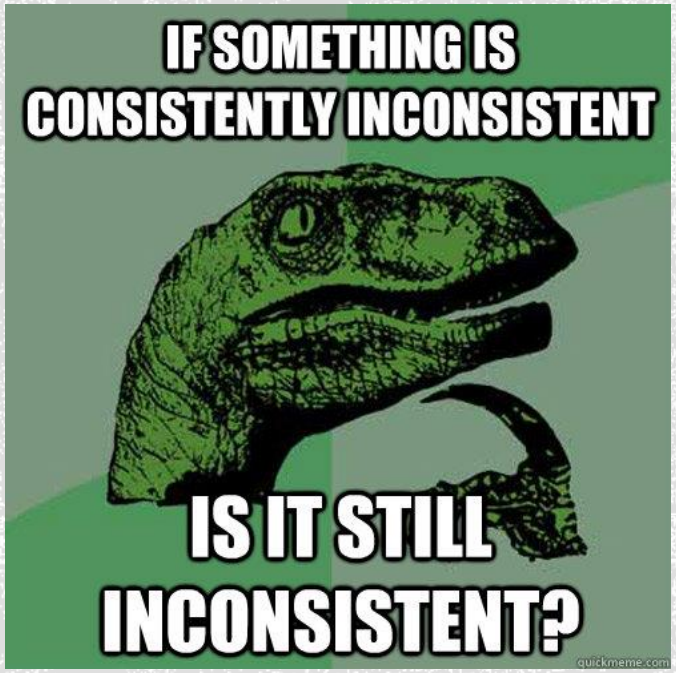
Fearless except for a snake phobia;

A violent killer who adores and protects kids;

Has impeccable table manners but eats people.

When your character's choices follow an internal logic, even the most surprising decisions can be justified (and believable!)

How to avoid predictability



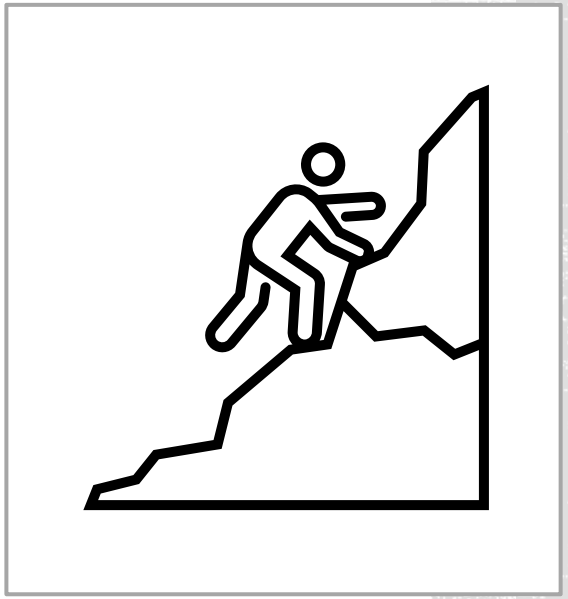
WHAT DO THEY WANT?

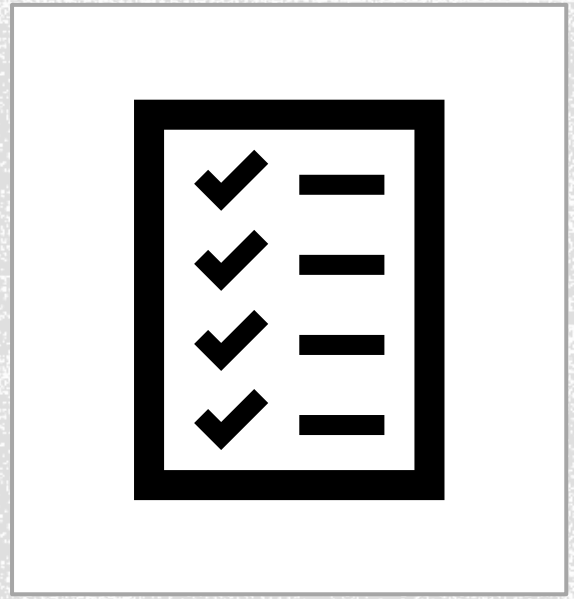
Our final section ties character and plot together.

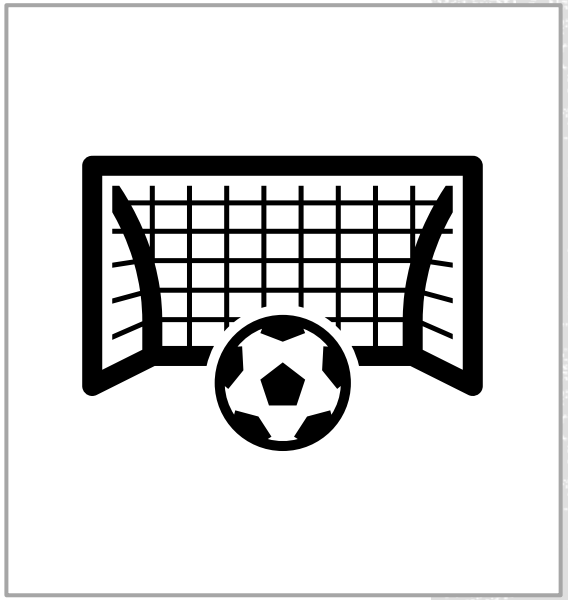
- What is your main character's goal?
- What will drive their action in the story?

The motivation behind the action – why do they do it in that particular way?

Objective/Desire/Superobjective







THE THREE LEVELS OF WANT

- Objective – get a makeover
- Desire – to be attractive
- Superobjective - I wish to be loved

- The superobjective is the one big thing the character wants.
- They may be unaware of it on a conscious level, or if they are aware, they might be embarrassed to reveal it to their family or in public.
- And it is the source of their more immediate (and obtainable?) desires and objectives.

Superobjectives help us understand our characters and what makes them act.

Superobjectives allow us to ensure our characters' actions are consistent.

The best superobjectives can connect our fictional characters with the themes of our story.

Further reading: Scarlett Thomas – *Monkeys with Typewriters*

Objective

Desire

Superobjective

Behind every surface objective lies a deeper desire. And behind this desire is something even more profound: Stanislavski's superobjective.

RESOURCES

Angela Ackerman & Becca Puglisi: *The Emotional Wound Thesaurus*

Linda Anderson: *Creative Writing, a workbook with readings*

E.M. Forster: *Aspects of the Novel*

David Lodge: *The Art of Fiction*

Donald Maass: *The Emotional Craft of Fiction*

Derek Neale: *A Creative Writing Handbook*

Nisi Shawl & Cynthia Ward: *Writing the Other*

Scarlett Thomas: *Monkeys with Typewriters*

Thank you for your attention for this past hour. I hope at least some of what we've discussed and worked on today will help you breathe life into your characters.

Carmilla Voiez

www.carmillavoiez.com