

The Psychology of Character

Near the conclusion of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Saint Petersburg detective Porfiry Petrovich, who is investigating the murder of an old woman pawnbroker and her sister, has a series of sit-downs with the book's protagonist and guilt-obsessed murderer, Rodian Rashkolikov, against whom Detective Porfiry he has no concrete evidence or witnesses. Nikolay, a workman in the building where the murder took place, has confessed to the crime, but Petrovich dismisses Nikolay's confession on psychological grounds, reconstructing for Rashkolikov a concise précis of the development of Nikolay's character and the reasons why Nicolay could never commit murder. Petrovich's presentation is as beautiful a character study as I have ever read. I would insist that students read these chapters were I ever to teach a course on how to write about character development.

I first read *Crime and Punishment* years ago when I was studying to be a psychoanalyst. Then, as now, I was stunned by Dostoyevsky's ability to zero in on the critical moments in Nikolay's development. In literature, the term "character" usually means the organization and structure of a person's character or personality. Although the definition is different than character as defined psychologically, for practical purposes they are the same.

Writers do well when they consider the character of their characters. Major characters, minor characters—it makes no difference; each character in a book, be it fiction or non-fiction, has their own backstory. The more a writer knows about the character of his character, the more compelling the story becomes.

So, borrowing from Dostoyevsky's Porfiry Petrovich—who preceded Freud's inquiries into the unconscious dimensions of character by many decades—here are some

questions that writers must ask about the *character* of all of their characters. Do the details of every character's *character* matter—even the most minor ones? Perhaps not, but knowing them intimately will allow for clearer exposition of thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

In psychoanalysis, this is called the psychodynamic formulation. If we think of personal development as a continuum from birth through death, then we want to identify the factors which contribute to or change the trajectory of a person's life. They may be:

1) *Antedating birth factors.* Was the character's development influenced before he or she was born? Is he named after someone? Is she the proxy for a dead child? Was the birth planned or unplanned? Was the parent hoping for a child of the different sex? Did the mother have adequate prenatal care? Where does the child fit in the birth order of siblings? What ages were the parents and where were they developmentally when the child was born? What was happening in the culture into which the child was born? What expectations did the parents have of the child? What expectations or preparedness did the parents have of parenthood?

2) *Early life factors.* Was the birth premature or complicated? Did the mother have post-partum depression or another disturbance of mood or behavior? How did siblings react to the birth of the child? Was there a change in culture that affected the child's development (moving, change in financial status)? Was there an abrupt departure of parental surrogates, death of siblings or significant others? Were there unusual diseases in childhood or nutritional factors that influenced development? Was the child a twin or was he raised in tandem with other infants and children of the same age? What were the sleeping arrangements in early life? Were there constitutional factors such as colic or irritability that impacted bonding with significant others? Was there a basic sense of trust between the child

and his caregivers? What role if any did substance use or misuse play in early childhood development?

3) *Ages three to six.* How did toddlerhood proceed? How did the child develop physically with respect to peers? How did the child take to peers? What was her childhood temperament: curious, avoidant, etc.? What approach did the parents take toward parenting at this stage of development? Who were the important bonds during this phase? Were any of those bonds interrupted abruptly (see, for example, Dickens's David Copperfield, whose mother's death left him in the care of a man who had little use for the boy)? Were there instances of early childhood sexual abuse?

4) *Ages seven through ten.* What were the child's natural proclivities and interests and will those interests continue in some form throughout the rest of his life? Who were the child's best friends? What kinds of early romantic relationships did the child form? How much encouragement to pursue intrinsic interests and artistic pursuits did the child receive from parents and siblings? What can be said of the child's imagination and creative proclivities?

5) *Puberty.* At what age did puberty start and how did the child experience his change in self-image. Who were the child's early love interests? How did the parents react to the child's burgeoning sexuality? How did disengagement from parents proceed? What about parental surrogates (coaches, clergyman, teachers, etc.)?

5) *Adolescence.* How did disengagement from parents resolve? Were peer relationships dominated by unresolved issues from earlier in life (reestablishment of parental bonds within the peer group or with first sexual partners)? What was the transition

from home like? How did the child handle mood issues and were there early signs of anxiety or depression?

6) *Young adulthood*. As the character moves on in development, is he able to negotiate the transition to developing a unique sense of self? How well did he do at developing relationships and career interests? What were the influences of role models at work? When, if at all, does the character become a parent and how does a birth affect the trajectory of the character's life? Are there stable love relationships? Is the character able to build trusting work relationships?

7) *Adulthood*. What roadblocks does the character have to overcome to become her best self? Is she able to maintain stable relationships at home—with primary love interest and children—and at work? How satisfied does the character feel about her progress in life as she faces the realization that she has passed the midway point of her existence? Interestingly, this phase is often referred to as a midlife crisis, which is indeed as normal, although sometimes as difficult as adolescence.

8) *Late life transition*. As the character has attained full maturity how does he feel about what he's accomplished in life? What does he feel about his legacy? How does he handle the inevitable regrets of life? Does he stay vibrant in the face of aging and infirmity? Ultimately, how does the character face impending death?

Although the writer may not know the answers to all of these questions about his characters, this guideline, adapted from a chapter on the seven stages of man in psychoanalyst Erick Erickson's *Childhood and Society*, will form a workable template within which to see his characters' place in the unfolding story.