



Screenwriting 101: How to Create Likeable Unlikeable Characters (/feature/category/screenwriting-101/3596-screenwriting-101-how-to-create-likeable-unlikeable-characters)

by JONATHAN WILLIAMS on 13 APRIL 2017



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It's a note I've received many times, "this character is unlikeable. How are we supposed to follow an entire TV Series/Feature for him/her and root for them?" And as far as I'm aware it's a common note I've seen given to many other writers. The truth is we love to write unlikeable characters and that makes complete sense. As writers, we are drawn to characters whose minds delve into the darkest regions of our psyche. Let's face it, no one's all that curious about what goes on in the mind of a happy-go-lucky soccer Mom. Not that there's nothing interesting there, but it is in the unlikeable that we see part of ourselves we either may not have the courage to access or wouldn't want to. Characters who delve into our darkest fantasies or curiosities as Carl Jung may describe it their shadow has become a prominent part of their primary personality.



The tricky part is making these characters likable. Unfortunately, I'm going to have to pull out a little Blake Snyder for you right now. To create an unlikeable character you essentially have to "save the cat." I'm not a big fan of this phrase. I mean, come on, can we imagine Cersei or Joffrey Lannister from Game of Thrones saving a helpless cat just to make us warm up to them? I can't. At least not without some suspicion as to what other more gruesome fate would await that poor feline. "Save the cat," feels like an all too wholesome deed for a predominantly unlikeable character. So here's the question. Why are we so enthralled by characters like Cersei Lannister, Walter White, Don Draper, Travis Bickle (Taxi), Mark Zuckerberg (The Social Network) and Henry Hill (Goodfellas). We love these characters, but why? And to skip over another cat analogy, we love these characters because they have flaws and wounds that are relatable. We see ourselves in their vulnerability, and yes, at times revel in their retribution, or hell, even admire some of their characteristics.

Let's take a closer look, shall we? Now, a fair warning, there are plenty of spoilers ahead so I'll try to break the characters down in a way where you can skip over anything that you don't want to be ruined.



Game of Thrones has been one of my great TV obsessions, as I'm sure it's been for many of you. I've had some friends comment that they dislike the show for its lack of "likable" characters and that they just can't get into how terrible they are to one another, but this is the reason I love it. Cersei is by far one of my favorites. Yes, the Lannisters do unspeakable things to people, but between herself and her brother Tyrian, these two characters have managed to outlast so many of their family members. The moment I grew to love Cersei was during her second season monologue, during the battle of Blackwater in which she was forced to sit idly by, trapped with the other "lesser women" while the men went out to fight. Here, while explaining to Sansa Stark what will happen when the keep is taken, she reveals her first real sign of fear and vulnerability. This is particularly notable for a character who, on all other occasions, stands head-to-head with any male adversary that comes her way. Now she has been whittled down to her gender, forced to hide in fear while the men did the work. Another great example is more recently in seasons 5 and 6, after having been humiliated by the High Sparrow and his lot, forced to walk naked through the streets while being taunted and abused in every manner of fashion. Here we may have reveled in her comeuppance, but I know for myself as the scene

drove on I pitied her, and when she got her revenge at the end of the following season by **(SPOILER ALERT)** blowing up the temple with all her enemies gathered within, I couldn't help but revel in her victory as I know many of my friends who watch the show had.



Let's take a look at another favorite, Walter White. Why has Walter White captivated such audiences in Breaking Bad? Why do we root for him as he is ruthlessly kills and destroys any rival that may threaten his empire? Simple, he comes from humble beginnings. Think of it for a minute. Why did Walter White suddenly decide to cook meth to begin with? It was a means to an end. An incredibly intelligent man, somehow forced into a mediocre life, now diagnosed with cancer is trying his best to see that his wife and disabled son are well supported when he passes on. The only problem is, that doesn't happen, and yet, by the time he's crossed the point of no return we are already invested in this loveable character who has unfortunately become corrupted by his own devices.

Here's one that takes a different path, Don Draper of Mad Men. I dare say it, but it's hard to find a loveable or redemptive quality about this man. So why do we admire him so? Granted a large part has to do with many of the characters with more admirable qualities, like Peggy, that surround him, but ultimately we seem to love Don Draper. He represents that greatest of American qualities -- he pulled up his bootstraps and by any means necessary made it to the top. We admire his success, it's the life some part of us wishes we could have. Of course, not all of us want to be womanizers or neglect our family, but to watch him in the room at work, we all aspire to be the Don Draper of our respective craft -- ruthless, intelligent, with a dash of class and wealth.



Now, many of these characters reside in the realm of TV, so for one more example, yes one more, just “drink your juice, Shelby.” Let us look into Scorsese’s Taxi Driver, Travis Bickle. A man seemingly on the edge. We can’t take our eyes away as he spirals down the rabbit hole of repressed rage and desire. Yet why do we follow this man? He’s clearly a loner and a psychopath. But perhaps that’s why we love him. Bickle represents our darkest repressed feelings. The anger at the unfairness of life we’ve all felt. The hurt and sexual desire we’ve felt for a person yet find our feelings unreciprocated. His angst is our familiarity. The only difference is he’s willing to go down the path to explore those emotions while we stay safely at home, cringing at his actions. Until he finds hope in Iris, Jodi Foster’s character, a chance to save someone from the darkness that rage within him, and he steer the course to redemption.

So why choose an unlikeable character? In some regards, they are difficult to write, but at their core, the conflict both within and around them makes them ripe for storytelling. The tricky thing here is to set your character along his or her dark path without making a story that makes your audience turn away in disgust. These characters all have a humanity about them. They are ruthless, but we understand and feel empathy for their flaws, their fears, and their pain. They all have some form of an admirable trait and a goal the audience can relate to. Whether it’s taking care of one’s family through any means necessary, wanting to exact revenge, rising to the top of our career, or simply fulfilling our deepest and most carnal desires, we write them to explore the unexplored part of ourselves.



With such characters, it is important to be self-aware with your work. A script with a theme of “people are terrible and should all be destroyed,” would be a much less compelling or attractive story than a story that can justify an unlikeable character’s actions through a theme such as “crime doesn’t pay.” The character must learn his lesson through his bad behavior and in your writing you must make the audience aware that you are aware that your character’s behavior is repellent; however, in your character’s mind, their ends justify their means. And if you’re going to redeem them by the end of your story, you better put them through hell and make them suffer for the damage they have caused just like Travis Bickle.

The easiest example I can describe as a path to redemption is the “Kingslayer” Jaime Lannister from Game of Thrones. A once proud and skilled warrior who felt near invincible in his position is literally cut down by his captors when they slice off his right hand. Now Jamie must not only relearn the skills that came to him easily when he had the use of his sword hand, but is now humbled by the realization that if he is going to make it out alive he will have to rely on the help of others, many of whom are ones who he once viewed as his lesser.

Likable characters are all well and good, but at the end of the day who doesn’t love a bad boy...or girl for that matter.

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