



JANICE THOMPSON, AUTHOR

Characterization: The Pandora's Box Approach

 0 Comments

We're going to take the information we've acquired in the [other characterization lessons](#) and use it to create characters. I call this lesson the "Pandora's Box" approach because it uses four different boxes (imagine one inside the other) to illustrate the various layers/depths of characterization.

You might recall the story of Pandora: Once that box was open, well. . .chaos ensued! The same is true with our characters. Once we dip into their inner stories, all sorts of things are revealed that explain who they are and what they are. We also come to understand the "why" behind their actions.



The Pandora's Box Approach

When I teach this material in a classroom setting, I use a hatbox with other/smaller boxes buried inside. The hatbox is lovely, but the interior boxes aren't quite as nice. They get smaller and smaller as you go until you reach the key in the middle of the smallest one.

BOX #1 (Outer Box):

The Pandora's Box Approach

- ▶ **BOX #1: Outer Box**
- ▶ Represents the “exterior” of your character—all of the things that are visible or obvious at a glance.

This box represents the “exterior” of your character—all of the things that are visible/obvious at a glance. You can tell, for example, that she’s from a well-to-do family because of the way she dresses. Or you can tell, for example, that he doesn’t care much about himself because of his wrinkled clothes and run-down car. If she’s always smiling, you assume she’s happy-go-lucky. If she wears a sour expression, you glean her unhappiness with life in general. If he’s moving fast all the time, you see him as being motivated. If he’s bossing others around, you know you’ve got a choleric (leader/bossy type) on your hands. You get the point.

BOX #2 (Just under the Surface):

This box represents all of the things about your character that appear when he/she is "scratched" (or bumped into). These are simmering just beneath the surface.

BOX #3: (Motivations and Compensations):

This box represents the motives of the person – what drives him/her to do the things he/she does.

BOX #4: (The Deep and Hidden Places):

This box contains the “key” – the “thing” that happened to your character (usually in childhood) that has given her the motivations she has.

WHERE THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD:

Here are some examples of how Pandora’s Box might play out in your novel. Let’s start with a guy named Max.

MEET MOTIVATED MAX!

1. Meet **Motivated Max**. We're calling him that because he's choleric/aggressive in nature. Max works in sales. He has a nice physique, he works out, wears nice suits, shoes, etc. These items are essential to his work. Max is married and has three kids. He's a workaholic and doesn't have much time to care for his family's personal needs. These are all things you can see by looking at **BOX ONE**—the obvious, external things.

2: Now, let's go to **BOX TWO**. Just below the surface, there's more to Max. These are things only a good friend or family member might know unless he's provoked. Internally, Max is exhausted and angry because he has to work so hard. He's working

even harder to cover the pain. What pain, we're not sure.

3: Now let's go to **BOX THREE**. In this box we learn about Max's motivations and compensations. We learn that he longs to prove something—to himself and others. He will die trying. He's angry because his family was ridiculed when he was growing up. They didn't have money like others in their neighborhood. His parents never had money to spare for vacations, etc. The struggle was great, but they covered as well as they could. Beans and rice were staples in this household, and now Max vows his (current) family will never eat beans OR rice even if it means he has to work around the clock. He wants to overcome his past with the illusion of perfection (and/or what he perceives as perfection in his mind). The way this might play out in the plot of your story is this: Perhaps Max (driven by his need to succeed SO THAT his current family won't suffer), befriends someone at work under the guise of friendship, but his true motivation is to take the guy's job. Why? To raise his status at the company. Why? To care for his family?

4: But, why (deeper still)? Because he's ashamed of his past. THAT is the key in **BOX FOUR** – the reason Max is the way he is. In truth, he loves his family so much that he only wants the best for them, and to not be able to do that would be to make them think he failed. He wants desperately to break the pattern of his family's history (several generations of men who didn't really take care of their families). Make sense?

MEET BUBBLY BRANDI

Now let's try this same approach using another character. We'll call her **Bubbly Brandi**. She's a Sanguine (an outgoing people person).

1: On the outside **(BOX ONE)** Brandi is a housewife, a soccer mom, a PTA leader and more. She's physically perfect (perhaps even a bit too perfect), is always smiling, perfectly made up and dressed, always cheering everyone on.

2: Just below the surface, **(BOX TWO)** there are a few things only a family member or friend might know. Brandi sees herself as being flawed, not pretty at all. She hasn't lived up to expectations of others, at least to her way of thinking. Puts herself down. She's also unhappy with the way her children live/react to her and not content in her marriage.

3: Now let's talk about Brandi's motivations and compensations (**BOX THREE**). She wonders why her husband (Max) isn't really "there" when he's home, and she works extra hard to make him happy. Sometimes her smile is a cover-up for pain, even around him. Her "physical perfection" comes out of a deep-seated need to save her marriage. This secretly bothers her. She's never felt pretty, not even as a child. In fact, many of her insecurities stem from the way she was talked to/about during childhood. She wishes things were easier. In fact, if it were up to her, they'd live in a different neighborhood and she'd wear jeans and a t-shirt. Oh, if only! She does a lot of volunteer work, giving hours to the National Charity League. She makes her daughter go with her, though the daughter doesn't care to. She's afraid of losing her friends/circle. Brandi's husband neglects her, (though she doesn't see it that way-blames it on the way she looks, etc) so she sings his praises (over-brags) to make sure he has a happy home.

#4: **BOX FOUR**. The deep and hidden places in Brandi's life are quite dark. She has a legacy of divorce in her family. Her parents were divorced. Her grandparents were divorced. She's afraid her marriage will suffer the same fate. Brandi was also a victim of sexual abuse as a child, though she never talks about it. There is a deep-seated fear in her, and a need to cover things up with physical perfection.

MEET SENSITIVE SANDY

Let's try this approach with another character, Max and Brandi's daughter, **Sensitive Sandy** (a melancholy).

1: **BOX ONE.** Sandy (in her late teens) is withdrawn. She would prefer to listen to music or write poetry than hang out with her mother (Brandi) or father (Max). She's a loner.

2: Just below the surface, **(BOX TWO)** there are a few things about Sandy that only her family or friends would know. She thinks that no one sees or hears her, so what would be the point in speaking, anyway? She's not pretty like her mother (remember Brandi's amazing physical appearance?), so why even try? In many ways, she feels rejected, so she keeps to herself.

3. If we dig a little deeper, hitting **BOX THREE**, we come to understand Sandy's motivations and compensations. She's motivated by the need to be free/unrestricted. She doesn't want to be boxed in by either of her parents, so she does her own "boxing" – by hiding out in her room. There, no one can critique you. There's no comparing yourself to other people in solitude. She looks at her beautiful/together mother and knows she'll never be like that, so why bother? On the other hand, Sandi is sensitive to the needs of others. She wants to rescue all of the pets in the pound, for example, but can't even adopt one because (according to her perfect mother) it would mess the house up. When her mother takes her to the National Charity League, she dreams of doing something even bigger, say, adopting an orphan child. Her heart for the underdog is huge, to the point of grieving over them.

4. Now it's time to get to the crux of things. In **BOX FOUR** we discover Sandy's deep and hidden places. Here we learn of her deep inadequacies. She feels she'll never measure up, so why try? In a sense, her mother is just like this, only her compensations are different. Sandy goes out of her way NOT to judge others (except perhaps her parents). Why? Because she wants to be as opposite from them as possible. She despises her father for blowing in and blowing out (with his work overload), and yet she's just as disconnected. She is frustrated with her mother for seeking perfection, and yet she's much the same (quick to see the flaws in others and not herself).

MEET LAID-BACK LUKE

We have one more person to meet in this household – the youngest son, **Laid-back Luke** (a phlegmatic). Let's take a look at this interesting character.

1. Luke is the laid-back one in the family. In **BOX ONE** we can clearly see that he's often out of work. You can find him on the couch, playing video games or sleeping. He hasn't really moved up the corporate ladder like he could have, often quitting jobs to avoid moving forward. Luke often disappears into himself or his video games.

2. Just below the surface we can see that Luke lies on couch because he's made up his mind (based on the actions of his parents) that he can't meet their expectations. He is

loaded with excuses about why he can't work: "My stupid boss fired me." "I've got

bad luck." On and on the excuses in **BOX TWO** go. It's always someone else's fault. He's been victimized, so why get up off the couch?

3. We find out in **BOX THREE** that Luke is motivated by fear of failure. His theory? If you don't do anything, you won't fail at anything. Simple enough, right? So, he only does what he does well—which ain't much. His compensation for being like he is? Excuses. He's always saying things like, "I'm really trying to find a job, but there aren't any," (etc.)

4. In **BOX FOUR** we go to the deep and hidden places with Luke to discover the key to his actions. Deep inside, he's afraid of rejection. Many negative words were spoken over him as a child. He was told (by his father, teachers, etc.) that he would never amount to anything. He was pronounced a "loser" by his friends. And so he has become exactly what they all told him he would be—a loser.

YOUR TURN!

Now it's your turn. On a separate page, create a unique character, using the "Pandora's Box" approach. Don't forget to add more depth as you go along!

Closing Thoughts

In closing, understand that characters can be used to advance the plot of your story, but this is not their specific reason for existing. They have to have endearing qualities and the reader must be able to relate to them.

Remember, even the good guys aren't always good, and even the bad guys aren't always bad. Your "good" characters must have flaws in order to be believable and your "bad" characters must have some redeeming value. Also, your characters could/should "grow" and "change" as the story progresses (for the better or worse,

depending on the plotline). Don't be afraid to go deep into a character's psyche, but don't give away all of his/her secrets at once. Unpeel them as the tale unravels – like an onion. Too much too fast and the reader won't have the satisfaction of feeling he/she has "discovered" these things on his/her own.

That's it for this lesson on characterization! Keep reading to discover more from [Free Writing Lessons.com](#).

SUGGESTED READING:

Getting Into Character by Brandilyn Collins

By JThompson

Published: March 22, 2024 - Last updated: May 5, 2024

Characterization, Fiction Lessons

Edit

← Characterization: 20 Tips to Develop Great Characters for Your Novel

Characterization: The Four Personalities →

COMMENTS

COMMENT

Write your comment...

NAME *

EMAIL *

Copyright © 2024 Janice Thompson, Author | Trellis Framework by [Mediavine](#)