

CONFLICTING DESIRES

Notes on the Craft of
Writing Erotic Stories

HAN LI THORN



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For those who told me when the hammer first rang true
And to those who tell me when it doesn't.

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Introduction

The idea behind this book is that much erotic fiction is astoundingly bad when examined in any terms other than ‘hotness’. Many sexy stories (whether published in print, in ebook form, or simply offered for free on the internet) are populated by one-dimensional characters and fueled by hackneyed plots, while the writer appears, too often, to be right there on the page, fobbing the reader off with a knowing wink that says, *‘I know this is hack work but hey, there’s a really kinky scene coming up and that’s what you paid for, right?’*

Truthfully, there’s nothing wrong with that approach. Many writers take that path; many readers are happy with the results. Some, however, want more. Some readers are looking for literate, well-plotted works that satisfy more than their libidos. They want erotica, not porn.

Many writers want more, too. I presume that you do, otherwise why would you be interested in this book? Online forums, mailing lists and news groups are also full of evidence of erotic authors wishing to improve their storytelling craft, yet the number of instructional books on the subject is small—and those books often concentrate on selling into established markets that are manifestly focused on something other than quality.

If you’ve spent any time on Amazon perusing reader-reviews of sexually-oriented fiction, you might be familiar with the occasional expression of delight recorded by a reader who has, unexpectedly, stumbled across a sexy story populated with engaging characters and driven by a credible plot. Perhaps predictably, these reviewers tend to be more than usually articulate. Why should a discerning, intelligent customer be forced to settle for less when reading for arousal than she does when reading for entertainment?

There is a market for quality stories that are both hot and literate. Almost by definition, it’s not the mass market, but it exists, it potentially includes everybody who’s interested in sex and in good storytelling, and it’s not well-served. Erotic writers who can tap that market can sell their work—even if they’re not signed with a major trade publisher.

All this begs some questions. Why is there so much mediocre

erotic writing around? How does it get published and why do people buy it? The answers lie both with readers, on the demand side, and with writers, on the supply side:

1. Poorly written, formulaic fiction sells in all genres, not just in the erotic market (many books matching that description also *fail* to sell, but that's a different matter).
2. Sex is a powerful commercial motivator. If a product happens to scratch an urgent erotic itch, it can find a market even if it's not exactly what the customer wanted.
3. Powerful feelings can result in powerful urges to record and communicate those feelings—so it's not surprising that many individuals wish to express their sexuality in story form. Only a fraction of these people have the time or talent to learn how to write well.
4. Even for those who *can* write well, bringing out sexiness and story in the same piece is hard work. Relatively poor erotic writing finds a ready market, so why spend the time and effort on producing the good stuff?

The idea of this book is that it *can* be worth working harder to produce the good stuff, even if it doesn't make strict commercial sense¹. It's worth doing if you aspire to touch your reader's heart and mind as well as her libido and pocketbook.

It's certainly worth doing if you have any inkling that you might be creating a kind of art.

Do you disagree with these ideas? Do you think that the typical quality of today's erotic novel is good enough, so that there's no reason to strive for something better? Do you agree with the chain bookstores that the most important thing about an erotic novel is its cover?² If so, then you surely have better things to be doing with your time than reading a book such as this.

1 Fiction writing in general seldom makes strict commercial sense. You can almost always make more money doing something else.

2 Erotic editor Mike Bailey tells us that bookstore chains order erotic novels based strictly on cover appeal, rather than on the content or the author's sales record (see Bailey's *Writing Erotic Fiction*, p140).

Still with me? Excellent! What does all this mean to you?

It depends on where you are at the moment, and on where you want to go.

If you're an erotic writer planning to sell novels to the established trade marketplace (to the big publishers who can reliably place their titles in the Erotica section at Barnes and Noble) then this book shouldn't be your first point of reference. My advice would be to obtain and analyze several samples of those publishers' products, in order to understand the style and type of material they can be confident of selling. You can often glean more from their books than from their guidelines (but read the guidelines too, of course). Then come back to this volume to nail things like point-of-view.

If you're a beginner who wishes to learn the nuts and bolts of erotic storytelling craft, then keep reading. As you absorb the information in the rest of this book, you will swiftly shed that 'beginner' status.

If you have some experience, but you're still a bit hazy on ideas such as how classic plots fit into a three act structure, how the various points-of-view work, or what foreshadowing is, then the information in this book can (with careful study) help you raise your literary game.

And if you're already a Mistress (or Master) of the Craft, then my hat is off to you. Now stop wasting your time, find somewhere quiet to sit down, and write an erotic story that's worth reading.

1

Character

The Importance of Character

Erotic stories are stories about human behavior. The genre is fundamental to our nature. Everyone who is here, is here as a result of sex. Everyone who ever will be here (barring cloning and the like) will be here because of sex.

No other area of storytelling can make a corresponding claim. Not science fiction, not crime, not the technothriller, not even romance. Sexual behavior is hard-wired into the human mind because without it, human characters would not exist.

Since sexual feeling is part of being human, it follows that the actors in sexual stories should be human—fully realized, fleshed out characters with whom the reader can empathize and in whom she can believe. Character is at least as important to written erotica as it is to any other genre. You might even say it defines written erotica: lacking character, sexy writing cannot rise above the level of bump-and-grind.

Some authors pull characters out of thin air, paying little attention to the process by which it happens. Others observe real people, dissecting their various aspects into the raw material for new creations that are (hopefully) unrecognizable to the originals.

However you populate your stories—even if you're still looking for the method that works for you—it can help to take a step back and spend some time understanding fictional characters from a more analytical viewpoint: in terms of their roles and story functions; their flaws and internal drives.

You will still be able to pull characters out of your subconscious if you wish, or to seek inspiration from life, but you'll also learn how to invent characters from scratch, by considering who you

want each character to be. As you gain a deeper understanding of your character's personality and role, you'll develop a clearer idea of the magic you want from her—and of how to extract that magic into your story.

Players and Voyeurs

Every character can act in one of two fundamental roles. The first role belongs to characters whose actions propel the story toward its conclusion. The second role belongs to characters who observe and reflect on behalf of the reader. One character might engage in either role at various times. In this discussion, I will refer to characters filling these two roles as *Players* and *Voyeurs* respectively.

A Player is a character who makes plans and executes them. She decides, acts, speaks, reacts and interacts. Particularly in commercial fiction, the main character is likely to be a Player.

If your story were dramatized for the theatre, the Players would be the ones who, through their words, actions and physical presence, dominate the stage. The terms 'actor' and 'player' have both been used to denote those who bring drama to life on the stage, and for good reason.

The term 'voyeur' derives from the French verb *voir*, meaning 'to watch' or 'to view', and is not used here in its pejorative sense (which is to indicate a person who gets off by spying on the intimate moments of others). Rather, it denotes a character who observes the unfolding narrative and who reports and interprets it for the reader. (In an erotic tale, of course, this observation and interpretation may also trigger a more carnal voyeuristic *frisson*—for the reader, if not for the character).

Although drawn into the Voyeur's mind, the reader does not have to accept his judgements; the Voyeur could be an 'unreliable narrator'. For example, he might be completely narcissistic, seeing only the things he wishes to see and interpreting every event in a way that casts him in the best possible light. Depending on the author's intention and skill, the reader may not accept these perceptions at face value, preferring to rely on the reactions of other characters and on her own insights, all of which might tell a different story.

A character can fulfil the functions of both Player and Voyeur within one scene. Alternatively, a character could move from one role to the other at different times. If you decide that your story can be told without significant reflection on the part of the characters, then you are free to populate it mainly with Players. Taking a story to the other extreme—by eliminating Players—would be more problematic. Without Players, there can be no action and thus no story. A Voyeur, after all, needs something more to observe than the workings of his own mind.

In the wider world of fiction, commercial work tends to be oriented toward characters who act, while literary fiction is often about characters who reflect. Players excel at driving plot, while Voyeurs excel at revealing character.

The balance you strike between the Player and Voyeur aspects will define the kind of erotic stories you create. Sex might be about physical action, but eroticism is more often about the internal lives of the characters, their thoughts and emotions and so on.

Even if you're setting out to write steamy action-driven pieces, you may be able to add another dimension by using a Voyeur in a minor role, or by giving a major Player the occasional scene where she takes some time to observe, reflect, and lay her thoughts bare for the reader.

How Players and Voyeurs Reveal Character

At the simplest level, a character in your story is no more than a participant in that story. At a deeper level, *character* in your story is what you reveal about those participants. This revelation can happen in three ways:

1. Players can reveal their characters through what they do. Every act performed by a character tells the reader something about that character. If a man approaches an attractive stranger and immediately flirts with her, that tells us something about the man.
2. Voyeurs can reveal their characters through introspection and self-examination. A wife watching in bitter silence while her husband flirts with another woman tells the reader something

about the wife's personality, and about the state of their marital relationship.

3. Both Players and Voyeurs can reveal the character of third parties through their judgements and reactions. If a husband flirts with another woman, that tells the reader something about his judgement of her. If his wife shrugs resignedly and lets the matter go, that tells the reader something of her judgement of *him*.

Character Archetypes

If you ever use terms such as 'Hero', 'Villain' and 'Sidekick', then you're already familiar with the idea of specific *kinds* of characters that fill archetypal story roles.

Joseph Campbell's 'Hero's Journey' (discussed further in Chapter 3, *Plot and Structure*, and in Appendix B) includes a large number of archetypes, including (among others) the *Herald*, *Threshold Guardian*, *Shadow* and *Trickster*. These archetypes are relevant to the Hero's Journey because they fit the shape of that narrative: the Hero is called to adventure by a Herald, and must pass some test set by a Threshold Guardian before entering the dark world where adventure is to be found, and so on.

These archetypes may sound complex and foreign, but they are not something Campbell pulled out of thin air. They recur again and again in our most powerful myths and stories, everywhere from ancient legend to some of the latest movies that pervade our culture and consciousness. Because of this, it's worth any storyteller having at least a nodding acquaintance with them.

While it would be possible to write a story that included every element of the Hero's Journey, it is usual for writers (and myth makers) to take only what they need—and that is what we will do in this chapter. If you're curious about the bigger picture, please consult Appendix B and the reading list you will find there.

Archetypes are universal. They can be adapted to any kind of story, including erotic ones. The question of purely erotic character archetypes (or more accurately, stereotypes) receives some attention later in this chapter; for now, we'll restrict the discussion to the most fundamental archetypes and their variants:

Protagonist

The protagonist is the extraordinary person whose story this is. Her actions drive the story; her goal is the goal of the story. By the end, the protagonist will have undergone some profound change, either externally (circumstances) or internally (values, belief or outlook) or both. The story may be narrated by the protagonist, or seen through her eyes, but this is not necessarily the case.

In most erotic stories, the protagonist will engage in many sexual encounters throughout the work, but (as ever) there are no hard rules. Imagine a protagonist who remains virginal until her 'profound change' occurs in the last few pages. The eroticism of the tale might arise from the actions of secondary characters, and from the nature of whatever conflict the protagonist faces—and perhaps from her studied emergence from shyness to insatiability.

Hero/Heroine

These terms are often used interchangeably with 'protagonist' but there's more to it than that. In Bret Easton Ellis's disturbing novel *American Psycho*, the protagonist, Patrick Bateman, is presented as a woman-killing sociopath—hardly heroic behavior, yet the story is clearly about Bateman.

A hero is a specific type of protagonist, one who is intrinsically good (if also flawed in some way), and often willing to sacrifice himself for the benefit of others. Beware: if you make your hero or heroine *too* perfect, you will end up with an unbelievable (not to mention irritating) 'Mary Sue' character. We will discuss the need for character flaws later in this chapter.

Antihero

An antihero is a protagonist whose values are in some way opposed to the usual heroic qualities. An antihero might still end up performing good deeds, but they won't come from his heart (unless he achieves some heroic transformation or redemption).

The motivations of an antihero may be selfish, cynical or even cowardly, but that doesn't mean you can't draw him sympathetically, and persuade your audience that he's worth rooting for. A well-drawn antihero will generally be more engaging than an unflawed goody-two-shoes hero.

Antagonist

The antagonist is the embodiment of the forces that oppose the protagonist. Sometimes the antagonist is a person, but it could be a group, a corporation, an animal, a force of nature, or even an object. Even if sentient, the antagonist is not necessarily evil. He may have a perfectly understandable motive to wish to prevent the protagonist from achieving her goals.

You can strengthen your tales by building sympathy and understanding for the antagonist; a work that presents both sides of the story is often more satisfying than a straightforward struggle between good and evil.

Villain

A villain is an antagonist whose motivations are, at best, morally questionable. A villain will never oppose the heroine for the greater good or even for her *own* good; rather he will oppose her for selfish and/or evil reasons. Those reasons must be credible if your reader is to believe in the villain. Few people are motivated purely by the wish to do evil; there is generally something more complex at work.

The line between the antagonist and the villain is not easy to define. Consider a devout parent who rules with a rod of iron, convinced of his moral duty to beat the devil out of his children. In his own mind and to his fellow zealots, his actions are driven by the desire to save souls. To his abused offspring and to the outside world, he may be pure evil.

How will the reader make her judgement? She will rely on her own prejudices and life-experiences, naturally, but she will also respond to the way you present the story.

Sidekick

A sidekick is a close companion and trusted supporter of the main character. In erotic or romantic stories, the sidekick might be a best friend, possibly someone with whom 'nothing could ever happen' — though there's no reason why the protagonist and sidekick shouldn't engage in a little hanky-panky if they're so inclined, and if that's the way the story takes things...

Playmate

The playmate (a term used for characters of either sex and any sexuality) is an object of sexual or romantic desire. Depending on the story, there may be one or several playmates, or none (in a story about a libertine who cares only for flesh without regard for whose flesh it is, the sexual partners will not emerge as developed characters). Naturally, playmates can, in their own turn, desire other playmates.

In many erotic stories, the relationship between the protagonist and playmate may largely be one of unfulfilled desire. In other words, playmates will often be unavailable. The term 'playmate' reflects the protagonist's wishes for this character, which are not always reflected in the character's story-role. If your playmates are always able and willing to hop into the protagonist's bed, you may be missing opportunities for developing erotic tension.

Mentor

The mentor is a wise figure who acts as instructor and guide to the protagonist. In stories based around the Hero's Journey, this is a key role, but its importance is lessened in many erotic tales. Still, the archetype is a powerful one. If your protagonist ever becomes somebody's sexual protégé or trainee, for example, then your story will include the mentor archetype.

Even if you don't have an older and wiser mentor in your tale, you might find that another character such as a sidekick or best friend can provide your protagonist with some welcome insights from time to time.

This brings us to the question, *'What are these archetypes for?'* A story certainly needs a protagonist and some kind of antagonist, but the remaining archetypes do not necessarily have to be expressed by means of a character. The roles can be omitted, or subsumed into another part.

Imagine an erotic story about two friends who figure as protagonist and antagonist. The protagonist has fallen in lust with his female best friend; his objective is to seduce her. She, in the role of antagonist, throws up one barrier after another but, being his

friend, continues to offer support and advice. Perhaps she even tries to help him out by introducing him to some eligible singles from her circle.

The conflict arises from the collision of friendship and desire; the resolution will occur when he succeeds (friendship develops into romance) or fails (the chance for romance is lost; perhaps the friendship is lost too), or some other solution is found.

This story has two main characters, but how many archetypal roles are represented? The man is the protagonist. The woman is his antagonist, but also his sidekick (she does her best to help with his problem) and mentor (she offers advice). Last but not least, she also fills the role of playmate, as the object of his sexual desire.

Don't be misled by the term 'character archetypes' into thinking that these roles must always be fulfilled by human characters. In the erotically-themed movie *Cherry 2000*, the playmate is (initially) a broken sex-android. The protagonist, Sam Treadwell, misses the fun times he had with his android and sets out on a quest to replace it. Being non-human (and non-operational) the android barely qualifies as a character—a fact that helps Treadwell decide which playmate he *really* wants by the end of the movie.

Or imagine a tale about a woman who discovers an ancient erotic text, one that inspires her to embark on a journey of sensual discovery. Isn't the book playing the role of her mentor?

Character Metatypes

The archetypes from the previous section tell you about the story-roles to be filled, but they don't say much about the characters themselves. For a character to live and breathe, he must become more than a simple archetype. He requires underlying drives, motivations and attitudes.

This is where character metatypes come in. A metatype captures some core aspect of the character, providing a skeleton on which you can build. Metatypes work at a high level; they don't try to nail down every detail.

The table opposite lists eight metatypes reflecting the worlds of brawn, brains, power, rebellion, faith, insight, charm and trickery. Each metatype defines some aspect of a character's core persona. A single character can contain more than one aspect.

Metatype	Traits/Motivations	Ultimate Expression Might Be...
Warrior	Strength, Survival, Victory	War heroes, Explorers, Athletes
Scholar	Knowledge, Intellect, Debate	Scientists, Theologists, Philosophers
Hierarch	Status, Privilege, Conformity	Bishops, Bureaucrats, Prison guards
Rebel	Independence, Equality, Individuality	Entrepreneurs, Bohemians, Mavericks
Zealot	Faith, Certainty, Obsession	Evangelists, Campaigners, Stalkers
Empath	Perceptiveness, Insight, Humanity	Counselors, Healers, Artists
Seducer	Glamor, Charisma, Sexuality	Gigolos, Movie stars, Courtesans
Rogue	Guile, Deception, Stealth	Tricksters, Gamblers, Politicians
(Insert any additional metatypes you wish to use in the blank spaces above).		

The list is based on several fundamental wellsprings of character, but you may wish to examine additional metatypes that don't have an obvious home in the basic set. If so, then add them in the space provided—and use them. But bear in mind that a metatype says something about a character's fundamental nature, not what she does or how she feels (though those are vital pieces of information, too). If a characteristic is something that you're going to use directly in your story, then it's probably the consequence of an underlying metatype, rather than being a metatype itself.

Consider a character who plays a sexually submissive role in your story. Where does that submission come from? How about:

- A warrior testing the limits of her endurance?
- A scholar who collects kinky Renaissance art—and acts it out?
- A hierarch craving a clear chain of command?
- A rebel craving an outlet for rebellion?
- An empath taking his understanding nature one step further?
- A seducer turned on as much by her own submission as by its effect on her Master?
- A rogue hoping to be caught and punished?

The answer could be any of the above, or something completely different. In the absence of any answer, however, your character will lack depth. Saying, 'She was just made that way' or 'She happened to meet a dominant man who brought out her submissive side' is not going to satisfy the discerning reader. By identifying a character's metatypes, you build a structure from which credible answers can emerge.

Metatype Pairings

Metatype is a wellspring from which character can flow. It tells you where a character comes from and where he is driven to go. The urges that drive characters can be complementary (reinforcing) or conflicted (opposing).

The eight metatypes in the table fall naturally into four complementary pairs and four conflicted pairs:

Complementary:

- Warrior - Zealot (strength and certainty)
- Scholar - Hierarch (codified knowledge and organization)
- Rebel - Rogue (individualism and dislike of authority)
- Seducer - Empath (love and understanding)

Conflicted:

- Warrior - Scholar (cerebral versus physical)
- Hierarch - Rebel (conformity versus freedom)
- Zealot - Empath (certainty versus understanding).
- Seducer - Rogue (charm versus charm).

Don't be afraid to mix up the metatypes. There's no particular reason for a seducer always to ally with an empath, or for warrior and scholar aspects not to co-exist in a single character. Tension keeps readers interested, whether it comes from your plot or from within your characters. A heroine who is somehow at war with herself will be more compelling than one who is free of any self-doubt.

Archetypes, Metatypes, and Stereotypes

Archetypes and metatypes represent two very different aspects of character:

- Archetype tells us about the role a character will play in the story.
- Metatype gives one or more spines from which we can infer interests, outlook and motivations, and around which we can further flesh-out the character.

You can use a table such as the one shown overleaf to think about the archetype-metatype dimensions of your characters (the assignments in the table are only an example).

In the table, the hero is a warrior and a rebel, while the villain is a hierarch and a zealot, and so on.

	Warrior	Scholar	Hierarch	Rebel	Zealot	Empath	Seducer	Rogue
Hero	X			X				
Villain			X		X			
Sidekick						X		
Playmate							X	X
Mentor		X						

The use of metatypes can also help you to create and understand characters:

1. You can use metatypes directly in inventing a new character: 'My protagonist will be a scholar with a strong roguish streak, while his playmate/antagonist will be a senior hierarch.' Then you can add more detail: he's an inventive con-man who does his home work, she's a trusted manager at a casino. As you proceed with this fleshing-out, you might find that the germ of a plot begins to emerge.
2. You can also use metatypes to find the heart and soul of an existing character. If you realize that your heroine has elements of both scholar and seducer then you can use that insight in developing her further—and to populate the story with suitable playmates for the sexy brainbox.

You may be tempted to invent or seek out specifically erotic character types: Bad Boys, Bigshots, Ice Queens, Slave Girls... the list might be endless. Why go to the effort of working from archetypes and metatypes if you can just pick the desired item from a list of stock characters?

The problem is precisely that stock characters are too specific.

They are solutions looking for problems. Your work will be more real if you state the problem first and then develop a unique solution.

The Ice Queen that you develop around the spines of 'playmate', 'zealot' and 'hierarchy' will be who she is for a reason. If you were to start with 'heroine', 'warrior' and 'seducer' you might end up with a very different Ice Queen. You won't necessarily expose your Ice Queen's internal makeup to the reader, but her metatypes (and your reasons for selecting them) will still be there and will affect how the character grows and is perceived.

The Ice Queen that you pluck from the stock character shelf has no such internal coherence. Lacking direction, she risks ending up as a stereotype.

The Flawed Character

Real people are never perfect, and neither should fictional characters be. Giving some appropriate flaws (whether mental or physical) to your characters adds depth and humanity.

A **minor flaw** has little effect on the story, but makes the character more believable and possibly more endearing. For example, a slight tendency to overspend would usually be a minor flaw, and would elicit sympathy from many readers.

A **major flaw** impacts the story directly. As with a minor flaw, a major flaw serves to deepen the character, but its main job is to drive the story. If the central conflict involves a man suffering from pathological shyness put in a position where he *must* get a date with an apparently unattainable woman, then his shyness is a major flaw; overcoming the flaw is central to the story's outcome.

Note: the fact that I chose overspending to illustrate a minor flaw, and shyness as an example of a major one, doesn't imply any judgement about the relative 'badness' of the flaws. The classification of 'major' or 'minor' is solely about the impact the flaw has on the character's story.

A **tragic flaw** ultimately causes the downfall of the flawed character. If you are writing upbeat erotica, you will not often create characters who are tragically flawed. In darker works, though, you might wish to do so. An example of a tragic flaw would be an erotic obsession that ends up driving the desired partner away forever.

Here is a (far from exhaustive) list of sample character flaws that might find a place in an erotic story:

- Addicted (to behavior or substances)
- Arrogant
- Bossy
- Closeted
- Dishonest
- Emotionally Remote
- False self-image
- Gossip
- Honest to a fault
- Impatient
- Insecure
- Jealous
- Lecherous
- Miserly
- Nosy
- Obsessive
- Phobic (any kind of irrational fear)
- Prejudiced
- Scatterbrained
- Selfish
- Shy
- Spendthrift
- Suspicious
- Timid
- Unfaithful
- Workaholic.

As you determine a character's flaws, also consider what might have caused them. Something in his career history? A childhood event? Some emotional burden he's been forced to bear through life? Or does the flaw come from the character's metatypes—a hierarch who's prone to arrogance, or a rogue who's too economical with the truth?

Even if the origins of a character's flaws never enter into the story, the fact that you know them allows you to portray the character more consistently, thus making her more real.

Fleshing Out

Once you've established some character spines and flaws, you can begin to flesh out the rest of the character. Much will flow from archetype and metatype, but certain aspects (such as physical traits) will not be influenced by these. Invent as you will. If you already have an outline for your story, then this will guide you too.

- **Background**—What is the character's social class? What was her family life like? What kind of education did she receive? Of what ethnicity and nationality is she? Is she religious? If so, how deeply and which religion?
- **Description**—What is the character's body type, hair color and eye color? Does she look striking or would she disappear in a crowd? What about her general posture, demeanor and attractiveness? What are her best and worst physical features—in her own eyes and in the eyes of others? Does she suffer from any physical problems?
- **Sexuality**—Is the character straight? Gay? Bi? How experienced is she, and how strong is her libido? What would she change about her sex life? Is she overtly sexual, or is she more demure? Is her sex life more about guilty secrets or innocent pleasures? Is she naturally dominant or submissive?
- **Mindset**—What morals/ethics does the character espouse? Is she a friendly person? Does she have a bitchy side? How open is she to new ideas? Is she more introverted or extroverted? Is it in her nature to be depressed, aggressive, passive, excited, jealous, cunning, aroused or lonely?

Remember that all these areas interact, both with the character's flaws and metatypes and with each other. A strict religious upbringing might affect the character's sexuality, or physical problems might be reflected in her mental outlook on the world.

Story Reveals Character

Up to now, we have discussed techniques that you can use to define characters at the planning stage. They can help you create and think about characters before you necessarily have a clear idea of what your plot will be.

Character can also emerge from plot. As soon as you begin your story, your characters start doing things. Then you can ask questions such as:

- **What does the character want, and why?**—Objectives and motives will inform the reader's judgement.
- **What choices does he make?**—Character emerges through actions, filtered by motive. Readers engage most when characters are forced into hard choices (for example, choosing the lesser of two evils), not when the choice is clear-cut.
- **How does it work out for him, and how does he respond?**—A character's reactions to setbacks and victories are telling.
- **How do other characters respond?**—A character can have a changing reputation within the story world. This in-story reputation informs the reader's perceptions. An undeserved reputation can generate sympathy, particularly if the character suffers because of others' erroneous impressions.
- **How does the character change?** Readers engage with protagonists who change or grow in some way. Major changes have a greater impact than minor ones.

Character Reveals Character

We will discuss one more technique that can help uncover character: asking the character herself. Some people recommend holding mock interviews with your characters, and that can work for certain writers.

If you find an interview too stilted, you could try something like the following. Imagine yourself sitting with your character in her home, and asking to see her photograph album. What kind of pictures are included? Which ones move the character most? Which has she torn out because they made her shudder with revulsion? Is there one she'd like to burn, if only she could bring herself to do it? Which picture makes her happiest? Which makes her squirm with embarrassment?

If she's not the sort of person to have a photo album, use some other collection of meaningful objects: the contents of her closet or nightstand, perhaps, or the jumble of shells, amber, flints and bone needles in the niche at the back of her hut.

Checklist of Character Essentials

1. Your protagonist must seem special in some way. You're free to write an erotic story about the girl-next-door, but she'd better move out from next-door (at least metaphorically) without delay.
2. Your protagonist should be flawed; too-perfect 'Mary Jane' characters don't ring true. Flaws can enrich a character. It's wise to keep your protagonist at least somewhat likeable though (unless you're specifically setting out to write a tale of alienation).
3. The reader should want your protagonist to achieve her erotic/romantic goals (and any other goals she may have).
4. The reader should care if the protagonist is in jeopardy.
5. The reader should also feel sympathy for the antagonist.
6. The protagonist should be transformed in some way by the events of the story.

Chapter Summary

- Character is at least as important in erotic fiction as it is in any other kind of fiction.
- Players drive the story through their actions; Voyeurs watch, report and judge.
- Archetypal characters fill specific story roles.
- Character metatypes provide spines around which characters can be fleshed out.
- You can capture an erotic character by means of BDSM (Background, Description, Sexuality, Mindset).
- Character is revealed through story.
- Character can also be revealed by the characters themselves.
- Major characters should be both extraordinary and flawed.
- Protagonists should undergo transformation.
- Effective characters engage the reader's sympathy.