

NIGHTMARE FUEL:
HOW TO WRITE HORROR THAT
GUARANTEES SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

Module 3: Humans and Monsters



INTRODUCTION

"I have been sometimes way too attracted by my own villains because in a way they seem to hold the secret to the heart of the narrative."

- Peter Straub

Characters are the heart of any successful horror novel. Without realistic personalities your reader can't imagine in living, breathing color, the vast majority of your attempts to generate legitimate fear will fail.

Sure, you can still elicit disgust through detailed description of gruesome and unpleasant scenes, but if you want readers to hang breathlessly on every word, to feel anxious about what lies ahead, and to lie awake in uneasy silence as their mind tosses and turns...

You're going to have to give them characters with whom they can relate, empathize, or at least find some understanding.

In fact, the most disquieting effect can be had when they find such understanding not only in your protagonist(s) but your villain too!

No devoted horror author could downplay the importance of characterization – without it, your imagined world, and every event within it is empty of soul.

In this module, we're going to learn how to craft three-dimensional characters that are distinct, consistent (until they don't have to be), and recognizable as human beings – not caricatures or stereotypes.

And as a quick hint of what's to come: it isn't only humans who deserve effort behind their appeal...

3.1: HEROES

As mentioned in the previous module, once the people in your story are let loose in their respective situations, they will tend to guide your hand.

Provided you have a complete understanding of their personalities, of course.

Creating compelling and believable characters doesn't have to be difficult. In the first instance, you can even use yourself as a basis. Think back to Module 1, and the Fear Investigation Questionnaire you completed. Perhaps you can form a character by changing how **they** would think and feel in response to the same fear stimulus you encountered.

They might have been able to brush that experience off, or only been mildly perturbed. Why is that? Draw lines backward based on the reactions you assign – could something in this character's past have hardened them to such a situation? Did they not understand the gravity of it? Why could that be?

On the other hand, their reaction may be much more extreme! Again... why is that? Could the reason lie in past trauma, irrational phobias or cultural superstition?

This is a very simple way to back-trace a solid foundation for your new characters. You're in control, so just think of a reaction and then consider why a certain person may behave that way.

Note that the specific fear or event you've used to lay this foundation doesn't necessarily have to factor into your story – you're only using it to generate a picture of the kind of person this character is. This picture can then be fleshed out using the character creation worksheet and exercise attached to this module.

Even the most basic bit-part characters – fodder for the beast, in essence – deserve this kind of attention. If you're rolling out previously unseen characters time and time again only to kill them off like some conveyor belt of carnage, your reader is quickly going to feel that your writing is repetitive and amateurish. Take a little time to enjoy the smaller roles. Let us get used to those people for a short while, show us their unique quirks and what makes them tick. Let us see the people they love, and who love them back.

And then rip them away from us.

You probably aren't going to introduce a character and then lay out three chapters of exposition and back-story so that we can "get to know them." That's both unnecessary and downright irritating, and a style that will quickly get repetitive for readers. Avoid these kinds of dumps at all cost – important character information should be drip-fed, sprinkled and seeded throughout the story. While your character sheet may be teeming with information (great for letting you, the author, get inside the character's head), there'll be plenty there that the reader doesn't need to be intimately familiar with. If something isn't relevant to the core story, don't force it onto the page.

Always remember that people are flawed creatures. We often mess up, and it isn't a bad thing to allow your protagonist to do the same. They may be leading the story, but they aren't perfect.

There's a balance to be struck, here. Every scene should not play out with your character making the right move and then being harassed by whatever evil is plaguing them – but they also shouldn't meander through, making a series of dunderheaded decisions that constantly put them in harm's way.

The key to overcoming this is often found in another important element of strong characters: consistency. If a character starts

the story completely ignorant of something – how to use a gun, for example – it isn't going to be believable if they pick up a weapon and suddenly display the tactical prowess and accuracy of a heavily trained military operative.

(Unless that's an intentional twist you're going to explain very soon.)

Readers like to see characters learn and evolve, to be there as perspectives are challenged, and their interpretation of the world skews. With the gun example, you could have your character pick up a pistol and totally flub the encounter because they don't understand how the weapon works.

Because of this failure, they seek to prepare themselves through training – so later in the story, they're much more formidable.

This doesn't have to extend only to weaponry. It could, for example, be the case that a character's misunderstanding of esoteric rites and rituals lands them in hot water. They mess up, and they (or someone close to them) pay the price.

Until you explicitly have that character take the necessary steps to change their knowledge or skills, they should remain as inexperienced as they began. **Never** betray consistency for the sake of a cool scene or plot progression.

People also have weaknesses, vices, habits, and eccentricities. They're what help us to stand out as individuals, so be sure to add these to your characters (and exploit them) lest you offer up a boring procession of clones.

It's also possible to draw out sympathy and anxiety by exploiting the natural human desire to protect the vulnerable. Situations can be made all the more tense by giving a certain character characteristics that put them at risk – think young, old, disabled, or infirm.

Cast your mind back to Module 1, where we brought up the example of an agoraphobic pursued in their home by a venomous snake. Now imagine the homeowner is also blind but manages to make a panicked phone call to her son, who is now racing against time across a busy city.

Things just got a whole lot more on edge, didn't they?

3.2: STAKES AREN'T JUST FOR VAMPIRES

Great characters need motivation, and motivation means stakes. In something of a symbiosis, greater stakes also lead to stronger motivation.

For a story to be truly gripping, and frightening, the stakes for your characters must be severe. Death, destruction, personal devastation – we're not just talking a stolen car, here.

But a stolen car *could* very well be an early stake. Here's why...

To keep readers enthralled, it's a good idea to **gradually** raise the stakes – to turn up the temperature bit by bit until the story is a bubbling, roiling pot of anxious tension.

In Module 5, we'll talk in more depth about using motivation to create tight, riveting scenes, but for now, let's look at the "stolen car" example:

Your protagonist awakens in the dead of night to the sound of a neighbor's barking dog. Something clangs outside, a little too close for comfort. Peeking through the curtains, they see a shady figure breaking into their car.

Right now, that's a stake. It's a minor, personal one, but a stake nonetheless. If they don't do something, they're going to lose the vehicle.

Let's say that car has sentimental value to them, so they decide to take direct action. They pick up a bat and go out to confront the intruder and, following a brief fight, the wounded robber, fleeing in the car, is involved in a collision and killed.

The police are on the scene, and our protagonist is brought in for questioning – there's potential they may suffer legal action for having hit the thief around the head with the bat, causing them to pass out at the wheel and crash.

The stakes are now greater. What was the loss of a car is now the potential loss of freedom, of stability. This could affect your character's entire family, now.

As this is going on, we're introduced to someone else. A murderer, fresh in the glory of a new kill... but their satisfaction is disrupted when they receive grim news: their brother has been killed in a car accident, and a man has been arrested.

Yep... your protagonist has inadvertently caused the death of the brother of a ruthless serial killer.

The heat isn't just on. It's getting hotter and hotter as the story progresses, the stakes rising in severity until anything and everything your protagonist holds dear is left hanging in the balance.

It's all too easy for many writers to fall into the trap of thinking that big stakes mean grand scale. After all, what importance does losing your spouse have in the face of total global destruction?

If you're doing it right, the answer is "everything." Fighting to save the world isn't interesting if we don't feel that the world has genuine people living in it. We connect with characters on a personal level, and that is what keeps us hooked as readers: we feel as though we are with them, could *be* them, and even in the face of global catastrophe it is our loved ones and ourselves that we remain most concerned about.

So high stakes don't have to be wide scale – but the reader needs to find sympathy in that which stands to be lost. An example of this is Graham Masterton's *Ritual*, in which restaurant critic Charlie McLean is forced to travel down a grotesque path to rescue the one thing he cares about most: his son. The scope is small, but the stakes are big – all because of our sympathetic connection with the character.

And the horror soon bubbles over into total dismay once the strength of the connection between Charlie's son and the cult at the heart of the story is revealed.

You should know the stakes and show us why they matter. Make it clear how the character feels, make us understand *why* these things mean so much to them, and then put those things in peril. Even if your reader doesn't personally hold the same things so close, their human empathy will hold out provided your characters feel honest and alive.

3.3: VILLAINS

Something frequently overlooked by those taking their first dive into the realm of horror is the character of the villain. For a compelling story, it's essential to keep one universal truth in mind: *save for a very, very small number of people, nobody is the villain of their own story.*

What does this mean? It means that from the villain's perspective, what they're doing is, in some way, the correct or righteous thing to do. That doesn't mean they believe it's the right thing for all of mankind, that they're doing a good deed for humanity. They may, in fact, be willing to sacrifice the entirety of humanity to fulfill their ultimate goal!

But they still believe that it's the correct thing to do. It's up to you to figure out why that is. Even as a psychopath wilfully manipulates, uses, and discards others, they do it firmly in the belief that it's acceptable because those other people were weak enough to be used. To them, it isn't bad or evil to act this way – it's just a fact of nature.

And that's why you need to put the same amount of effort into fleshing out your villains as you do with your protagonists. Everything you've been through in sections 3.1 and 3.2, regarding personality and stakes, is just as important to thoroughly explore for your villain as it is for the other people who will be leading the story.

Think of things from the other perspective – as the stakes rise for your protagonist, how are they rising for the villain at the same time? What goals do **they** have? What are **they** risking if they allow the protagonist to succeed? As the story moves forward and the protagonist enjoys both small wins and devastating losses, what are the mirror effects of these on your villain?

Thoroughly understanding how both sides of the clash will react to events makes the difference between a reader finishing a chapter and thinking *well, that happened*, and them eagerly turning the page, saying *oh boy... the villain is going to EXPLODE because of this!*

Having this deep understanding also sets you in good form for introducing shocks, such as your protagonist discovering they've been manipulated all along. What seemed like wins or positive acts were, in fact, aiding the villain's ends. Prepare your characters, do this right and the reader will never see it coming – and they won't feel cheated when it does.

If you can lead the reader down the path of finding themselves sympathetic to the rationale of the villain, you're in excellent shape. We don't necessarily have to **agree** with a character to connect with them, so if you can connect the dots of the villain's purpose in a way that appears logical from their perspective, it will lead to a deeper psychological discomfort in your reader.

And the real knockout is landed if you can successfully reveal your protagonist to have been the villain all along. Fumbled, this twist is a cliché of huge proportions... but if you handle it with careful depth and attention to detail, your reader will be utterly horrified at the fact they thought they were fighting the good fight.

Don't make your villains into caricatures. If you do, you'll regret it deeply.

3.4: MONSTERS

Creating believable monsters takes effort. Sure, you can have a decent enough effect on readers by simply throwing a bundle of teeth and claws into a crowd – but if there’s going to be a lengthy story, it helps to fully understand how your monster thinks, hunts, reproduces and finds motivation.

For monsters that have a degree of humanity or sentience – think vampires, werewolves, or alien entities, for example – it’s a great idea to complete a full character exploration, just as you have with your main characters.

These creatures are thinkers, and those that can act human most of the time will indeed have personality characteristics that define them. Things that make them happy; things that make them angry; things they’re scared of, and other elements such as biases, influences, and patterns of speech.

They have history and don’t exist solely within the isolated bounds of the story you’re telling unless they’ve only just come into existence. So you should think and plan their backgrounds. Where have they come from? How long have they been around? What have they seen? What have they suffered? How has that influenced their behavior and led them to the current circumstances?

For the likes of werewolves – creatures that are functional humans at times and ravaging beasts at others – map out the cognition of both of their states. Frequently, those suffering from lycanthropy lament their condition – the human does not look kindly upon the beast they become.

So what’s the difference? When they become the beast, what changes? What are *its* signature behavior patterns, instincts, and motivations? What kinds of things entertain it, confuse it, anger it, or calm it? Is the human privy to the beast’s actions –

locked inside but cognizant of events – or are they asleep until their body is returned to them?

How does the creature communicate? Do they have a language? What does it sound like? Use the creature worksheet attached to this module to note down a few phrases or behavioral utterances. Placing these sparsely throughout your story helps round out another dimension of the creature, setting it more firmly within a realistic imaginary space. The reader need not understand what something coming from the mouth of a monster *means*, exactly, but the introduction of sound adds both a sensory anchor *and* a notion of intent – of presence and agency within the world. Defined sounds can also be used to set up tense scenes, where the creature’s signature gurgling emanates from somewhere nearby. We just don’t know when, or if, it’s going to strike. Draw parallels to familiar and unpleasant noises in your description of these sounds, and you can really set the reader on edge.

This module’s creature worksheet should make it much easier for you conjure a few heart-stopping beasts of your own, but if you find your imagination escaping you, think back to Module 1. Take a look online for monsters of folklore across the world, and note down those that interest you.

If you don’t like the idea of fully adopting a pre-made monster, complete with modus operandi, physical makeup, means of destruction and all of that, why not pick two or three and think of interesting ways to combine them into something new?

That’s what we’re going to look at next.

3.5: THE CLASSICAL CREATURE MIXTAPE

Okay, so most classic monsters have been done to death. Zombies, vampires, werewolves, giant insects, angry ghosts... trying to conjure a fresh setting for these subjects can feel disenchanting at the best of times.

Yes, it's true that ultimately it's about your characters, not the specific situation – but how many times do we need to see a rag-tag group of survivors holed up in a building during the zombie apocalypse?

Plus nobody wants to hear "*well written, but nothing we haven't seen a thousand times before*" as positive feedback for their efforts.

If you're taking the creature feature route and find it too challenging to come up with something new, go ahead and try blending a few classic monsters and see what you can come up with. Nothing's too silly if you approach it correctly – just look at the astounding range displayed across literature and film.

Alien serial killers, life-force-sucking vampires from space, vampire *clowns* from space – these are all blends that have worked.

Some may say that if you're taking the classical route, you should abide by the rules. Well, there **are no rules**. Yes, you might annoy purists if your werewolf shrugs off a silver bullet, but so what? **This** lore is yours. If you can explain it, you can allow it. Nowadays, this kind of spin is exactly what's needed to keep your story from falling into banality with demanding genre crowds. Challenge the status quo, and surprise your reader.

Author Brian Keene enjoyed much success in the genre with his series of zombie novels beginning with *The Rising*. Many fans of zombie fiction believed it would be a standard zombie apocalypse, but the truth behind the walking corpses is actually

much greater in scope and mythology: a demonic invasion from another dimension!

This allows his zombies to organize, speak, use weapons, drive cars, and be a much more deadly threat than your standard mindless flesh-eater.

If you can build solid foundations and make the reader believe, then you should feel free to twist classical monsters in any way you wish.

But let's not talk about sparkling vampires, okay? Moving on!

To finish off this module, run through the following exercise to practice creating characters and monsters. Even if you aren't planning a story right now, this is still worthwhile. Store the sheets, and you can use them as inspiration for some upcoming work. What kind of situation will you drop these characters and monsters into?

Exercise:

Use the Fear Investigation Questionnaire, and the worksheets attached to this module to flesh out a couple of characters for a story. Don't worry about what they may be subjected to later on; just get a feel for who they are in isolation.

Once you've created a rounded picture of an individual, spend some time and write a short piece chronicling an average day in their life. Use this to get to know them in their ordinary state – it will help you immensely with framing their reactions when you drop them into a terrifying scenario.

When you do this for characters within your planned stories later on – whether they're on the side of good or evil – it will also give you a better feel for your wider

world, how these different people interact with it, and where they may cross paths.

If your story features a monster, do the same for it – perhaps a short chronicle of a hunt (failed or successful), or its behavior and thought patterns when at rest.