Creating Character Arcs by KM Weiland

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**Part 1: The Positive Change Arc**

* This arc is all about the protag’s changing priorities. They realize they’re not getting what they want because they want the wrong thing or their moral methods for achieving what they want are all wrong. They need inner change.

**Ch 1: The Lie Your Character Believes**

* Characters resist change, and out of resistance comes conflict and out of conflict comes plot. The external plot is all about the character’s inner journey.
* Questions to ask about the lie your character believes:

1. What misconception does your protag have about themselves or the world?
2. What are they lacking mentally, emotionally, or spiritually, as a result?
3. How is the interior Lie reflected in the character’s outer world?
4. When the story opens, is the Lie making their life miserable? If so, how?
5. If not, will the Inciting Event and/or First Plot Point begin to make them uncomfortable as a result of their Lie?
6. Does your character’s Lie require any qualifiers to narrow its focus?
7. What are the symptoms of your character’s Lie? (Ex- fear, extreme hurt, inability to forgive, guilt, secrets, shame, etc)

**Ch 2: The Things Your Character Wants and Needs**

* The ‘want’ is the thing your character thinks will solve their problem vs what they actually need. The want is usually something external/physical.
* Their need is the Truth. Their need is a realization. This might not change their external life, but it will transform their perspective of themselves and the world around them, allowing them to better cope with their external problems.
* Their inner conflict is about the silent war between their Want and Need, but it’s also the gasoline in the engine of the outer conflict.
* Questions to ask:

1. What is the Lie holding your character back?
2. How is the LIe making your character unhappy or unfulfilled?
3. What Truth does your character Need to disprove the Lie?
4. How will they learn this Truth?
5. What does your character Want more than anything?
6. How is their plot goal related to or an extension of the Thing They Want?
7. Do they believe the Thing They Want will solve their personal problems?
8. Is the Thing They Want holding them back from the Thing They Need?
9. Does the Thing They Need preclude them gaining the Thing They Want, or will they only be able to gain the Thing They Want *after* they’ve found the Thing They Need?
10. How will their life be different once they embrace the Thing They Need?

**Ch 3: Your Character’s Ghost**

* WHY does your character believe their LIE? Because of something in their past, their ghost (or wound or shard of glass). This is something your reader can discover bit by bit, the mystery of the ‘why’, and can have a grand reveal toward the end of the book. (Or sooner, up to you!)
* The bigger the Ghost, the bigger the LIE, the bigger the arc. Stories don’t always call for big ghosts or lies though.
* Some stories don’t reveal a Ghost, like in *Jurassic Park* & *Cars*.
* Questions to Ask About Your Character’s Ghost:

1. Why does your character believe the lie?
2. Is there a notable event in his past that has traumatized them?
3. If not, will there be a notable event in the First Act that will traumatize them?
4. Why does the character nourish the Lie?
5. How will they benefit from the Truth? How ‘big’ is your character’s Ghost?
6. If you made it bigger, would you end up with a stronger arc?
7. Where will you reveal your character’s Ghost?
8. All at once early on or piece by piece throughout the story, with a big reveal toward the end?
9. Does your story *need* a Ghost to be revealed?
10. Would it work better if you never revealed it?

**Ch 4: The Characteristic Moment**

* The moment your character shows up on the page and catches our reader’s attention or doesn’t.
* This moment must introduce your protag; probably reveal their name, indicate gender, age, nationality, possibly occupation; indicate important physical characteristics; indicate role in the story (that they’re the protag); demonstrate the prevailing aspect of their personality; Hook readers’ sympathy and/or interest; show the protag’s scene goal; indicate the protag’s story goal; demonstrate or at least hint at the protag’s Lie; and include the plot, preferably directly, but at the very least in a way that foreshadows later events.
* For your opening, select an event that will: Make the protag appealing to readers; introduce both their strengths and weaknesses; build the plot. MAKE IT MEMORABLE & HOOK THE READER.
* You need to hook the reader before you reveal major flaws that would turn your reader off. What do you like about your character despite their faults, show off why they’re interesting.
* Try to work your character’s Lie into their Characteristic Moment, or as quickly as possible. Sometimes there are 2 characteristic moments, especially if you have a prologue of your character as a kid, and then Ch1 of them as an adult. The Characteristic Moment can take a couple of scenes.
* Questions to ask:

1. What important personality trait, virtue, or skill best sums up your protag?
2. How can you dramatize this trait to its fullest extent?
3. How can you dramatize this trait in a way that also introduces the plot?
4. How can you demonstrate your protag’s belief in their Lie?
5. Can you reveal or hint at their Ghost?
6. How can you use this scene to reveal the Thing They Want Most?
7. Does your protag’s pursuit of both the overall goal and the scene goal meet with an obvious obstacle (i.e. conflict)?
8. How can you share important details about your protag (name, age, physical appearance) quickly and unobtrusively?

**Ch 5: The Normal World**

* The Characteristic Moment gives us character, but the Normal World gives us context. The Normal World is your 1st Act, the Set Up. It reveals personalities, values, strengths, and weaknesses. It grounds the story so you can see the change/contrast in Act 2.
* Questions to ask:

1. What setting will open your story?
2. How will this setting change at the First Plot Point?
3. How can you contrast the Normal World with the ‘adventure world’ to follow?
4. How does the Normal World dramatize or symbolize your character’s enslavement to the Lie?
5. How is the Normal World causing or empowering the Lie?
6. Why is your character in the Normal World?
7. If your character doesn’t want to leave the Normal World, what is helping them mask the discomfort caused by their lie?
8. If your character wants to leave, what’s stopping them?
9. Will the character return to the Normal World at the end of the story?
10. If the Normal World is a legitimately good place, how will the protagonist need to change in order to appreciate it?

**Ch 6: The First Act**

* **The 3 Acts consist of 1) the hero’s decision to act, 2) the action itself, 3) the consequences of the action - *A Writer’s Journey* by Christopher Vogler**
* 6 Parts of Character Arc:
  + 1) Reinforce the Lie
  + 2) Indicate the Character’s Potential to Overcome the Lie
  + 3) Provide the Character’s First Step in Discovering How to Grow and Change
  + 4) Give the Character an Inciting Event to Refuse
  + 5) Evolve the Character’s Belief in the Lie
  + 6) Make the Character Decide
* Questions to Ask:

1. How will you introduce and reinforce your character’s Lie in the First Act?
2. How will you sue the ‘elbow room’ in the First Act to space out the various layers of your character’s Lie, goals, and personality?
3. How will you indicate your character’s latent potential to overcome the Lie?
4. What aspect of the Truth can you share with the character in the First Act?
5. How will you share it (through another character’s mentoring, etc)?
6. What will be your Inciting Event?
7. Why will your character initially reject the Inciting Event?
8. How quickly will your character get over his initial rejection of the Inciting Event’s ‘call to adventure’?
9. Toward the end of the First Act, how will your character’s belief in how he serves the Lie begin to evolve?

**Ch 7: The First Plot Point**

* Is around the 20-25% mark, character leaves normal world, and is a major scene - like an explosion or a first date. Make it exciting and memorable.
* The First Plot Point’s effect on your character’s arc is found in 3 decisions: Prior, During, and After. Like, in Jane Eyre her decision to become a governess preceded meeting Rochester. During the plot point is their reaction to it, then After - they embrace it and charge forward (or are kicking and screaming about it, but ultimately doing it).
* The First Plot point will define their arc, and you’ll know you’ve found the right one if it sets your character on a path to destroy their Lie
* Questions to Ask:

1. What major event will slam into your character’s Normal World and force him to alter their original plans?
2. What decision will lead your protag to the First Plot Point?
3. Will the First Plot Point seem favorable?
4. If so, how will the complications turn out to be worse than the protag expected?
5. Or will this event be obviously disastrous? How?
6. Will the protag willingly embrace the First Plot Point and walk into the Second Act under their own power?
7. Or will they have to be dragged, kicking and screaming, through the gateway between acts?
8. Will the First Plot Point destroy the Normal World?
9. Or will it physically remove your character from the Normal World?
10. Or will it warp the Normal World around the protag?
11. How will your character react to the First Plot Point?
12. What new plot goal will the character form in response to the First Plot Point?
13. How will the First Plot Point put your character’s feet on the path to their new truth?
14. How will the First Plot Point create a new world in which the character will be ‘punished’ for acting according to their Lie?

* **The 1st Act is about setting up your character’s Lie. The 2nd Act is about destroying the Lie & helping the character find the Truth that will allow them to combat the external conflict and grow into a whole person. Plan a First Plot Point that will tear away your character’s safety net and force them to step out into the biggest adventure of their life.**

**Ch 8: The 1st Half of the 2nd Act**

* **\*The 1st half of your book is about the character reacting to events and the 2nd half is about them taking action\***
* There’s a Pinch Point at the 37% mark where the antag flexes their muscles and reminds readers what the protag is up against.
* 4 parts of the character arc:
  + 1. Provide character with tools to overcome their lie- give them information, but don’t just tell them, have it be practicable opportunities in which it can be *shown* to them.
  + 2. Show the protag encountering difficulties in pursuing their lie. The lie becomes a stumbling block in his progress toward the thing they Needs and the thing they Wants, and therefore their overall plot goal. From this they’ll develop new ways to not fail (due to their lie) but it’ll still be the wrong way to do things.
  + 3. Move the character closer to what they want and further from what they need. They have surface victories, seeming to defeat the outer conflict, but losing the inner battle.
  + 4. Give the character a glimpse of life without the lie. Either through another character’s actions/attitude or from the MC themselves, but only let it be a glimpse. Maybe they see there’s life beyond the lie & it looks pretty awesome.
* Questions to ask:

1. How is your character reacting to the first plot point?
2. What ‘tools’ can you provide to help your character build the first rung in the ladder that will scale their lie?
3. What minor character can offer advice or exemplary behavior to help mentor your protag?
4. How can you show the protag the first step in overcoming their Lie, instead of just telling them about it?
5. How will your character attempt to use their Lie to solve plot problems?
6. How will they be ‘punished’ as a result?
7. How will these failures evolve your character’s outlook and tactics?
8. How will your character’s single-minded pursuit of their plot goal lead them closer to the thing they Want?
9. How will their pursuit of the thing they Want cause them to risk turning further away from the thing they Need?
10. After the first plot point, how will the new world or the altered Normal World provide the character with a glimpse of how life might be without their Lie?

* Use the 1st half of the 2nd Act to explore the depths of your character’s personality, beliefs, and desires to create endless possibilities for fun, conflict-powered scenes.

**Ch 9: The Midpoint**

* In the first half of the 2nd act the MC has been blundering around but slowly learning their lesson and figuring things out, and these revelations will lead them to the midpoint.
* The midpoint marks the end of the reactive phase and the transition to the active mode where they take control of the conflict.
* The midpoint is when the character will gain a better understanding of both the external conflict and their inner self *in* that conflict. They finally see the Truth and accept it. The Truth is the key to achieving their plot goal and by extension the thing they Want.
* The character still hasn’t rejected the Lie, and will continue to claim they believe it through the rest of the 2nd Act, but they’ll begin to act in harmony with the truth. They’re a divided person, caught between the Lie and the Truth. They’re not sure how to implement the new knowledge of the Truth and therefore won’t be able to achieve true victory in the 2nd Act.
* Questions to ask:

1. What personal revelation strikes your protag at the Midpoint?
2. How is your protag different at the Midpoint from who they were at the First Plot Point?
3. How does the revelation at the Midpoint prompt the character to move from reaction to action by providing them the knowledge to start taking control of the conflict?
4. What definitive action will your protag take against the antagonistic force?
5. What new understanding of the conflict does the protag gain at the Midpoint?
6. What new understanding of themselves does the protag gain at the Midpoint?
7. What is their Moment of Truth?
8. What Truth do they recognize and accept?
9. What causes them to accept it?
10. How is your character still consciously clinging to their lie?
11. What actions are they taking that are based on the Truth?
12. How does the contrast between the simultaneously held Lie and Truth evolve his inner conflict?

* The Midpoint is when your character finally *gets it.* The puzzle pieces fall into place. They realize what they must do to win the conflict and they adjust their actions accordingly. Identify the Truth your character must recognize and create a mind-blowing scene to support it. It should be one of the most memorable chapters in the book.

**Ch10: The 2nd Half of the 2nd Act**

* Your character sees what they have to do to win the conflict and turns active in taking control of the conflict for themselves. They start taking correct actions to get the desired results in their quest for the plot goal, BUT they still haven’t given up the Lie and it’s still the crux of the problem. They think they see clearly and charge into the conflict but they only have 1 eye open.
* There’s a second pinch point at the 62% mark which emphasizes the antag’s ability to defeat the protag and foreshadows the final battle.
* The 2nd Half  is where you need to assemble all your story’s playing pieces, so they’re in place for the 3rd Act.
* 6 parts of the character arc
  + 1. Allow the character to act in enlightened ways. They now know how to defeat obstacles with greater speed, but this doesn’t mean they’re not impeded.
  + 2. Trap the character between the old Lie and the new Truth. They haven’t faced the Lie and therefore they’ll make mistakes. They believe the Truth, they’re acting on the Truth, but they’re not 100% committed to it, the Lie is holding them back and causing severe inner conflict. One minute they act on the Truth, but the Lie rears its head, and they try to act on the Lie instead.
  + 3. Initiate the character’s attempts to escape the *Effects* of the Lie. They’re uncomfortable with the Lie’s *effects* on their life and they move toward the Truth, swatting the Lie away like an annoying bug. They move toward the thing they Need and away from the thing they Want (even though they still want it). They might start acting more selflessly.
  + 4. Contrast your character’s ‘Before and After’ mindsets. Put your character in situations that reflect back on the first half and have it be a reverse image to show the reader their progress in their personal evolution. Show how your character is different.
  + 5. Provide your character with a false victory. The thing they Want is within their grasp but it doesn’t feel right. If they take it, they’re under their Lie again and will sacrifice the thing they Need along with the Truth. They convince themselves they can have both their Want and Need. The conflict seems won or within sight of victory. It’s a false victory, physical victory, that they sacrificed their deep inner Need for. They’ll be paying for that in the Third Act.
  + 6. Blatantly demonstrate the crux of your character’s arc. Give your character a solid validation of the Truth, spell it out. What is the thing they Need? You can show this with dialogue between characters, an action on the part of the character, or internal narrative, but it’s what will help them battle the Lie in the Third Act.
* Questions to ask:

1. How is your character starting to take control of the conflict after the Midpoint?
2. How is the revelation at the Midpoint allowing your character to see the conflict in a new light?
3. What ‘tools’ has the Midpoint revelation given your character that make them more effective in confronting the antag?
4. How is your character still clinging to the Lie?
5. How is their new Truth causing friction with their old Lie?
6. How is your character still out of sync with the Truth?
7. How does your character’s mindset still support the Lie?
8. How do their actions demonstrate their growing belief in the Truth?
9. How can you use a ‘before and after’ scene to prove how your character is different from who they were in the first half of the story?
10. What false victory will end the Second Act?
11. How has your character compromised the Truth in order to (seemingly) gain the thing they Want?
12. How have you blatantly demonstrated the Truth somewhere in the Second Half of the Second Act?

* In the 2nd Half of the 2nd Act your character is learning the value of implementing the Truth into their life. They see the Truth in action and begin to value it, more than they value the thing they Want. But out of habit they’ll betray the Truth, but they’re too far gone on the Truth to fully abandon it. They’re already a changed person, and they’ll prove that in Act Three.

**Ch11: The Third Plot Point**

* The Third Plot Point is the most important moment in their arc. It’s the low moment in their story. The Lie reappears front and center and they have to confront it and defeat it.
* The Third Plot point forces a crisis in both the plot and the character’s arc. The seemingly belated antag has one more trick up his sleeve and reverses the playing field, and delivers an unexpected (but foreshadowed) revelation - which can either be a plot twist or a sudden and full understanding of the protag’s Lie-empowered weakness. It’s the new info that lays your protag open for the final blow & they’re so stunned they can’t fight back.
* The ultimate choice between want and need. The Lie & the Truth. The plot goals are endangered, not just in the outer conflict but also in the inner choice on the protag’s part. They realize they can’t have both, and it should be a soul-wrenching choice. They understand what they have to gain and lose.
* The old self dies. They choose Truth, and give up on the Lie and the thing they Want. This is an action vs just a decision, they won’t be able to change their mind.
* Questions to ask:

1. What crushing event and/or revelation turns your character’s apparent success into the worst defeat yet?
2. How was this defeat enabled by the character’s refusal, thus far, to completely reject the Lie?
3. How does this defeat force your character to face the true ramifications of the Lie?
4. How can this defeat offer the character a clear path toward the thing they Want?
5. If they take this path, how will it force them to reject the thing they Need?
6. How can you set up a clear and decided choice between the thing they Need and the thing they Want? Which will they choose?
7. How can you literally or symbolically represent death in this scene as a way of reinforcing the demise of your character’s Lie-empowered old self?

* The Third Plot Point rips away options and forces your character to be honest with themselves *about* themselves and about their situation. In the climax they’ll rise from the ashes, ready to do battle from a place of inner wholeness.

**Ch12: The Third Act**

* Last 25% is about intensity, the confrontation with the antag, and while they did the right thing, the Truth just ruined their life (b/c they can’t get what they Wanted). They’re now figuring out if the Truth was worth the price and if they want to keep believing it. If they want to return to the Lie this is the last chance.
* 4 parts of the character arc:
  + 1. Up the Stakes. Right after Third Plot Point. They’re reacting to the havoc the Third Plot Point made on their life. Up the stakes, make them feel down, and then make them choose between the pain and rising to continue the fight. They realize the price they paid to gain the thing they Need was worth the pain. They now concede they’d do it again if they had to. They’re a new person.
  + 2. Keep the Character Off Balance. They won’t 100% reject the Lie until the climax, so they’ll still have doubts.
  + 3. Prove How Far the Character has Come. Reinforce the changes in small ways by having them reject the Lie in a physical way.
  + 4. Renew the Attack Upon the Character’s New Paradigm. Right before Climax. The character’s new paradigm of Truth should come under attack, from someone other than the antag who will show up at the Climax. It can be a minor antag, a skeptical/fearful ally, or even the character’s inner doubts. Depending on the pacing, you might only have room for 1-2 paragraphs, esp if it’s too close to the Climax. The Lie will be attractive, they’d have a better chance of winning or avoiding the fight. But they turn it down.
* Questions to ask:

1. How does your character react to the Third Plot Point?
2. How has their embrace of the Truth made a mess of their life and specifically, their pursuit of their plot goal?
3. How can you up the stakes by forcing them into both physical and emotional straits?
4. How do these straits force your character to reconsider whether or not the Truth is the right choice for them?
5. How do they rise from these doubts determined to cling to the Truth?
6. What doubts is the character still experiencing about the Truth?
7. How is their inability to completely reject the Lie keeping them from total happiness and empowerment?
8. How are your character’s attitudes and actions different in the Third Act from how they were in the First?
9. How can you subtly reinforce the difference prior to the Climax?
10. How will your character’s devotion to the Truth be put to the test?
11. What character or situation will you use to try to tempt or bully your protag back into serving the Lie.

* Tie off loose ends. Test the character’s devotion to the Truth and their growing pains in shedding the Lie to move forward to face the ultimate test in the Climax.

**Ch13: The Climax**

* The Climax is the reason for the story. The protag hangs onto the Truth to defeat the antag. It’s a scene or series of scenes. It brings the primary conflict to a resolution that fulfills the book’s every promise while still surprising the readers. Begins near the 90% mark and ends right before the final scene or two. Depending on how complex the conflict is and how many antags there are, it can have 2 climaxes, with one being the ‘faux climax’.
* Possible timings to reject the Lie: In the Climax - if the exterior conflict with the antag is closely related to the protag’s internal conflict, they can harmonize the exterior and interior conflicts. It ups the tension and stakes but leaves little room to internalize things and complete the arc; Before the Climax - Your protag has accepted the Truth and transformed, ready to defeat the antag. They don’t have uncertainty in the Truth but rather if it’ll help them defeat the antag or get them killed. It needs to happen close to the climax to have the right impact and lessen the gap.
* Climatic Moment - the climax in the climax. The single moment that resolves the story’s overall conflict, the scene the readers have been waiting for. The obstacle between them and their plot goal disappears and they’ve destroyed the antagonistic force. They either no longer desire the thing they Wanted, or they still want it but reject it, the reasons for wanting it have changed, or they gain it but only because they focused on the thing they Need.
* Questions to ask:

1. How does your character prove they are a changed person in the Climax?
2. Does the renewed attack upon their new Truth happen before the Climax or during the Climax?
3. What are the pacing challenges of either choice?
4. How does the character’s final embrace of the Truth enable their victory in the exterior conflict?
5. Do they fully embrace the Thing they Need in the Climax?
6. How do they use the Thing they Need to defeat the antag?
7. Do they gain the Thing they Want?
8. How has their view of the Thing they Want changed?
9. Do they still want it?

* They’ve completed their arc.

**Ch14: The Resolution**

* Caps the character arc with emotional mopping up. It bookends the opening scene in the new Normal World.
* Answers the thematic question in the beginning. Blatantly state it with character interactions or dialogue, but don’t slap the reader with the ‘mortal of the story’.
* And gives a preview of the character’s new Lie-free life. What will they do next? How will they act now? Maybe they revisit the physical setting in the beginning of the story. If the Normal World was destroyed or they don’t have a reason to go back there, then you prove the difference through the protag’s actions. This final scene is a fun/joyful one.
* Questions to ask:

1. How does your Resolution contrast your story’s beginning?
2. How does your Resolution mirror your story’s beginning?
3. How is the character’s new Normal World different from the original one?
4. Does the character return to their old Normal World?
5. How does the Resolution answer your story’s thematic question?
6. How can you state the answer to the thematic question in dialogue without making it seem like a ‘moral of the story’?
7. How does your character act differently in the Resolution from how they did at the beginning of the story?