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Protagonist v. Nemesis: Keys to Conflict

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The simplest way to imbue a story with a strong, central conflict is to have your Protagonist confront a Nemesis.



Your choice of a Protagonist is easily one of the most critical decisions you make because of the character's dominant influence on a story:

- The Protagonist usually goes on some sort of physical and/or emotional journey.
- That journey creates the spine of the plot.
- That journey shapes the contours of the character's psychological arc.
- The Protagonist's goal almost always dictates the story's end point.
- All the other major characters are linked to the Protagonist and his/her journey.
- Of all the story's characters, the Protagonist generally undergoes the most significant personal metamorphosis.

Plus there's this: The Protagonist almost always serves as the primary conduit into the story for a script reader or moviegoer. Symbolically the Protagonist functions as you, often imbued with 'everyman' qualities to maximize the character's reach to the widest possible audience.

But Protagonists do not exist by themselves. Indeed, if conflict is the stuff of great drama, there is perhaps no conflict more compelling than that of a Protagonist versus a Nemesis.



Warden Norton represents Andy's sense of self-judgment and guilt related to his role in the death of his wife.

A Protagonist almost always has a *conscious goal*, what we may call Want, and an *unconscious goal*, what we may call Need, but there is no conflict, no drama, indeed no story unless someone or something actively strives to block the Protagonist from achieving their goals.

Enter the Nemesis. This character not only functions as a Protagonist's foe, the Nemesis is capable of generating within the script reader tension, anxiety, disgust, even fear. While we may try to avoid these feelings in our daily lives, we are lured to them in our stories, a safe place in which to experience the 'darker' side of existence. Plus, the simple fact is most of us find this type of stuff damned entertaining.

Therefore, it stands to reason if you can zero in on the core essence of both your Protagonist and Nemesis characters, grasping what binds them together both in terms of plot as well as their psychological connection, you will have discovered the centerpiece of your story at almost every level.



Helen represents the perfect woman in Annie's infantile fantasies about romance.

I'm sure we've all heard these buzzwords about how to craft a Protagonist character: *Give them a flaw... Make them sympathetic*. Nothing wrong with that in theory, but in practice how that often gets translated is an *Outside-In* approach to writing, whereby the writer, standing 'outside' the story, forces some sort of sympathetic element or flaw 'into' a character. Much preferable is an *Inside-Out* approach where the you go *into* the Protagonist, immersing yourself in that character's psyche and personal history so a whole spectrum of Disunity elements emerge.

The key to a worthy Nemesis is opposition:

- **Powerful Opposition:** More than just obstructing the Protagonist's path toward their goal, a Nemesis should create an active, crafty and formidable resistance.
- **Significant Opposition:** The resistance a Nemesis provides should not be a general one, but rather something tied to the Protagonist's specific psyche and journey.
- **Entertaining Opposition:** The efforts and actions of a Nemesis should not only be powerful and significant, they should also be interesting and compelling.

In the best case scenario, the Nemesis is a kind of projection or physicalization of the Protagonist's negative impulses and instincts, a version of what Carl Jung calls the *shadow*. If you can find that dynamic between these two key characters, you have conflict which is grounded in a shared psychological connection specific to the Protagonist's transformation.

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