

## Lesson 2: Developing Compelling Anti-Heroes

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### Identifying Unique Anti-Hero Traits

Now that we have established what an anti-hero is, it's essential to identify the unique character traits that distinguish them from conventional heroes or villains.

One of the first things to consider is what motivates your anti-hero. Unlike traditional heroes, who are often motivated by a desire to do good and protect the innocent, anti-heroes may be motivated by something entirely different. They might be driven by revenge, power, or even a desire for self-preservation.

Another key trait of anti-heroes is that they tend to have a flawed personality. This can manifest in a variety of ways, such as arrogance, selfishness, or a lack of empathy.

It's also worth noting that anti-heroes often exist in a moral gray area. While they may not be outright villains, they might engage in morally questionable behavior to achieve their goals. This ambiguity can make them fascinating characters to explore, as it forces the audience to grapple with complex questions of morality and ethics.

Anti-heroes often fall into two categories or exhibit both at time - those that are unaware of their qualities and those that are fully aware of their qualities. What makes an anti-hero interesting, complex, and compelling to follow is how they act on those qualities that define them.

If we look at the characters we discussed in lesson one, we can see these categories pretty clearly as well as how they're subverted.

For example:

#### 1. **Murphy Mason**

While Murphy is aware of her bad behavior in terms of drinking, smoking, having random sex, and constantly choosing herself, we also see Murphy develop a sense of awareness around just how selfish and short-sighted her actions and behaviors can be and how that affects not just her, but the people she loves.

Throughout the series, Murphy has to confront the qualities of herself that she knows are terrible, but she also has to come face to face with the parts of her that she didn't realize were negative.

#### 2. **Beth Dutton**

Beth is a character that embraces her flaws for the most part. She knows that she carries an antagonistic approach to her life, her work, her relationships and even knows that she comes off as cruel and hurtful.

Rather than hide these qualities, Beth turns them into motivators. She uses them like a cloak of protection to move through the world. Yet, there are aspects of Beth that she can't see because of the depths of her trauma. Some of her most vicious, condescending and terrible actions are done without her fully understanding why she is doing it. And because she has not worked through her trauma, she doesn't take the time to see herself in light of these qualities rather she turns a blind-eye.

#### 3. **Scarlett O'Hara**

Scarlett mostly falls into the category of unawareness. When we meet Scarlett in the beginning of the book, she really has no self-awareness of her behaviors and actions. And in fact, when confronted with them, she is often emboldened by them -- like when Rhett explains that he enjoys her fiery and passionate approach to life. But it's not until the very end of the book, after many tragedies and negative consequences, that she starts to look inside herself as the reason why certain events and situations have transpired. She becomes aware of her undesirable traits only after it's too late, but leaves room for hope that she can start making changes to counteract her actions and behaviors.

#### 4. **Jessica Jones**

Jessica is another character that fits into both categories. She's well aware of her vices and the negative responses to her own personal trauma, but she is often in the dark about how these same traits affect those around her. Her self-loathing makes it difficult for others to get to know her and like her as well. She shuts herself off from feeling anything positive about herself, therefore acts like there is nothing of value she has to give. Through the series, we see Jessica start to develop a self-awareness around this and she begins to see that she is worthy of support, help and love despite her tendencies to act out in the wrong ways.

### **Avoiding the Pitfalls of Anti-Heroes**

One of the most important aspects to developing anti-heroes is to avoid falling into the trap of overdone and boring character traits, and tired tropes. For example, the brooding loner who always has a tragic backstory is a common trope that is tiresome and overused. Another example is the woman with daddy issues who can't commit to or develop a relationship with a significant other out of abandonment issues.

This is not to say that those two examples should never be used, but rather, to write them in a new and compelling way that leaves the reader with more than a tired cliché.

The best way to avoid those tired tropes or clichés is to explore the motivations and backstory of your anti-hero in depth. Often, what makes a character truly compelling is the complexity of their past and the way it shapes their present behavior.

Let's go back to the example of the character with daddy issues. You can avoid going into trope territory by subverting the typical situations, events or experiences that are often linked with that trope. Perhaps the character's father didn't abandon her voluntarily... maybe he was instead put into witness protection as a way to protect and shield her from someone or something dangerous. Perhaps in another example, the father didn't intend to abandon his daughter, but was caught up in a situation beyond his control that keeps him away or causes his disappearance or death.

The point is that instead of relying on a trope at its surface level, you should dig deeper into the trope to find the complication, unique viewpoint or perspective that will help set your anti-hero apart from others.

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### **Writing Exercises**

#### **Exercise #1:**

1. On a piece of paper or in a grid on your computer, label two rows - one for "Common Tropes" and one for "Complications."

2. Make a list of common tropes that you think could belong in an anti-hero's backstory under the "Common Tropes" column.
3. For each common trope you list, try to find at least one "complication" to the backstory that sets this trope apart from the surface level.

Common Tropes	Complications
Dead Parents at an early age	The parents are only perceived to be dead, but are actually alive
Savior Complex	Couldn't save someone they loved or tried and failed
Cynical of helping others and receiving help from others	Tried to "help" someone and the person/situation ended up worse than before they tried to help
Pursuit of financial or materialistic gain	Had security before, but lost it all.

### Exercise #2:

Now you're going to combine the results of your list making into one table.

1. Create four rows on a piece of paper or in a grid on your computer, label the rows, "Trope," "Complication," "Anti-Heroic Traits," and "Aware"
2. Look at your lists and add tropes that you might want to explore further and how you might subvert that trope with a complication
3. Look back at the negative or "anti-heroic" traits exercise and decide which of them you've stated seems aligned with the trope and complication
4. Lastly, add whether or not you believe the character would be aware or unaware of their traits

Trope	Complication	Anti-Heroic Traits	Aware or Unaware?
Cynical of helping others and receiving help from others	Tried to "help" someone and the person/situation ended up worse than before they tried to help	Doesn't try to help anyone, appears selfish and self-centered, is motivated by fulfilling their own needs.	Mostly Aware - they are aware that they've tried to help someone in the past and it turned out poorly, believes that they have to do everything "alone."