SECRET #1

Personalizing

ACTOR'S TECHNIQUE:

As no two human beings are exactly alike, so every role is unique—a soul to be created that is distinctive and individual. Attributing mere general mannerisms to characters based on their age and social class will produce cutout dolls that may just as well be moved from play to play. Through discovering the inner character and from observing real life—how one person holds his head, how another walks or uses her hands—the actor must pull together a composite of mannerisms that creates the unique character being portrayed.

NOVELIST'S ADAPTATION:

The technique of *personalizing* each character is just as important in writing fiction as in acting. Without personalizing, we face the pitfalls of clichéd characters such as the "old man" or the "young woman." Our adaptation of personalizing focuses not on hair color and body type, but on the discovery of a character's inner values, which give rise to unique traits and mannerisms that will become an integral part of the story.

The Importance of Personalizing

"You can dress him up but you can't take him out."

"All dressed up and no place to go."

Ever heard those phrases? Their meaning is a little different, but they share a common thread. Both imply that outer accoutrements are less important than inner character and motivation.

Personalizing is absolutely critical for a novel. Yet many writers, especially new ones, have particular trouble with the concept of developing full-fledged characters. As noted in the Novelist's Adaptation, personalizing focuses not on physical attributes but rather on a character's inner values, which lead to traits and mannerisms. When we speak of "traits," we mean the general attitudes of your character, such as patience, arrogance, humility, selfishness. Traits define the basic personality of your character, just as we use traits to define people in real life. When we speak of "mannerisms," we mean specific movements of a character: the way he holds his head, the way she walks or talks, his facial expressions, and so on.

But how do we go about personalizing? And what can we learn from Method actors? The Method actor's secret to personalizing is based upon this principle:

> Personalized characters are built from the inside out.

In *Building a Character,* Stanislavsky notes that the most talented actors don't just assign traits and mannerisms to a character based on general facts about the person. Instead, these actors allow traits and mannerisms to grow of their own accord by first discovering the character's "right inner values." These inner values are the core truths of the character. They define the person's worldview; they drive his or her desires and actions.

For most novelists, Stanislavsky's approach is a radical idea. Instead of allowing ourselves to discover our characters' inner values,

we have a tendency to characterize them on the outside—merely dressing the mannequin, so to speak—hoping somewhere along the way to discover a few inner truths about them. But too often, we don't go deep enough.

The trouble is, no matter how exciting our plot, how intriguing the action, or how great the danger, readers will fail to be caught up in the story unless they connect in some way with the characters. This connection is not superficial in the least; it links the reader's innermost being to the very soul of a character.

Two years ago, while I was on vacation at a lakeside resort, a mental image of a character popped into my head. I was minding my own business, ogling all the large boats along the docks, when this character invaded my thoughts. He was a young boy of about ten, a runaway, hungry and very alone. I "saw" him standing on the dock, head tilted back, watching a small group of people on a huge boat preparing to go out on the water. The longing this boy felt overwhelmed me until my own chest nearly burst from it. More than anything in the world, more than money in his pocket or food in his stomach, he wanted to be on the boat with those people. Only a few feet separated him from that boat, yet the distance may as well have been a canyon. He wanted to be up there not because his presence on that boat would convey access to wealth, but because he simply wanted to *belong.* Wanted it, yearned for it with all his might and strength. So close to people laughing and enjoying each other, yet so very far. So utterly alone.

This little boy caught my heart. We connected on a very deep level. Two years later I still wonder who he is and when he will fully reveal himself to me. To this day I couldn't tell you his traits or mannerisms. I'm not even certain what he looks like. These things aren't yet important. What *is* important is my knowledge of the inner value that most shapes this boy: belonging is more important to him than anything else in the world.

I must admit this is the only time such a vision of a character has happened to me. Usually I approach a novel with a basic plot and *then* discover the characters. Still, somewhere along the course of writing, they'll inevitably do something I hadn't planned. How

exciting when that happens! But whether you start with a character or a plot in mind, ultimately it's the characters who will drive your story.

Unfortunately, not all our characters are as open about their inner values as this young boy was with me. Many at first tell us nothing but their physical appearance. That's okay; take whatever they'll give you. If a character shows herself to you, and she clearly stands five feet four inches tall with brown hair and green eyes, don't dismiss her. Welcome her, in fact. Invite her to curl up on the couch, tell you who she is. Only then will you begin to truly connect. Her appearance may attract you, but her inner values are what will make her compelling.

Now, let's search for those intriguing inner values of your character and see how they can give rise to a unique, personalized set of traits and mannerisms.

The Personalizing Process

Naturally, you'll have to begin at the beginning: learning the basic facts about your character. One of the ways authors do this is to "interview" the character.

Some authors have a very structured way of interviewing their characters, using a long list of questions regarding age, gender, likes, dislikes, background, education, family relationships, and so on. That's fine. Making a checklist of details is a good entry into the personalizing process and will dovetail with what we are trying to accomplish. In a moment we'll talk about where such an interview list will fit into the technique of personalizing.

Authors at the other end of the scale use a free-form method to get to know their characters, making notes as facts about them come to mind. Still other authors use techniques somewhere between the free-form and the structured interview. Whatever your method, you do need to discover the highlights of your character's background and experiences, for these will color the person's view of the world. But for true personalizing, remember this: *these facts about your char-*

acter will not be ends in themselves. In fact, they will be merely the beginning.

In a nutshell, here are the steps to the secret of personalizing. We'll go through each one to fully explain the process.

Step 1. Begin a line of questioning with your character and pursue it until you "hit bottom." Hitting bottom means you arrive at the "So what?"—or logical conclusion—of that line of questioning.
Step 2. The final "So what?" question will reveal a core truth or "inner value" about your character.
Step 3. In turn, this inner value will give rise to a trait.
Step 4. Then pursue this line of questioning even further to see if you can hit bottom a second time.
Step 5. If you can hit bottom again, you will discover a specific mannerism based on the inner value.

Now, how to start this questioning process?

If Stanislavsky were alive today and willing to teach us novelists, his questioning process would most likely be based on the three levels of characterization that he describes in *Building a Character*. At each of these levels a deeper probing of the character gives rise to more personalized traits, which in turn reveal specific mannerisms. Stanislavsky's disappointment lay in the fact that, amazingly, many actors stopped at Level A, and many others made it only to B. Yet only at Level C is true individualization reached.

All too often, novelists, like actors, tend to stop at Level B. We have understandable reason for doing so. Levels A and B aren't very difficult. We have one or two main characters in mind and a story to go with them, or perhaps we start with a story and figure out a couple of characters. Within the process of discovering our stories, we tend naturally to reach Level B. And then we think we have enough. The problem is, in this personalizing process, you will not conclude Step 1 and hit bottom with a line of questioning until you reach Level C. If you stop too soon, you'll miss discovering those valuable core truths about your character.

Level A: Division of characters into general categories such as socioeconomic level, age, gender, and career

Imagine the quick introduction of a game show contestant, and you've got Level A. "An English professor from Omaha with three children" or "A retired dog trainer who loves to fish." Getting your character to answer Level A's basic question of "Who are you?" is easy enough. Your character is a military man, a beautiful and wealthy woman, a homeless person, or an elderly gentleman. Any such category automatically brings to mind an array of potential mannerisms. In walking, for example, someone in the military may tend to march, while a beautiful and rich woman may strut, a homeless person listlessly amble, and an elderly gentleman shuffle. Or in eating, the military man may clear his plate with a quick deliberateness while the rich woman revels in the ambiance of fine food and etiquette. This level of characterization is of course necessary, and it's true that major divisions such as career and socioeconomic status begin to define a person. But we can easily imagine the stereotypical disasters we'll create by stopping here:

an abused, abandoned romantic heroine = fearful, feels unworthy

a detective who's clawed his way out of the slums = chip on his shoulder

an elderly man with unrealized dreams = bitter, sour-faced

Let me hasten to add that the above aren't bad in themselves. Your detective from the slums may indeed have a chip on his shoulder. The question is how to move him from mere stereotype to a unique persona.

Level B: Moving toward specifics

At this level we can begin to imagine some distinctions within a main category as we further define the character and how he or

she fits into our story. You most likely will already know the answers to basic questions in Level B. For example, is your military man a private, a major, a general? Or is he in a specialized unit such as the Navy SEALs? Is the homeless person new to the streets or someone who's lived there a long time? In his working days, was the elderly gentleman employed in a factory or was he a high-level executive?

Answers to these queries will lead you to numerous lines of specific questioning. Let's say your story involving the military is about a young man who has just enlisted in the Marines. Perhaps he is following in the footsteps of both his father and grandfather. How will his family history affect his attitude toward the rigorous demands of the Marine Corps? Obviously, this young man's actions and outlook will not be based on the years of military training inherent to a general. But what if his grandfather was a general? After growing up hearing his grandfather's stories and learning at the old man's knee, might your character think he knows more than other new recruits? Might he approach his peers with a bit of a cocky attitude? Or might he have placed his grandfather on such a pedestal that he feels he can never begin to measure up?

Or let's say your character is that beautiful and wealthy woman. Is she newly rich or was she born into money? A character with newfound wealth may harbor a different attitude toward money than a woman who was born with a silver spoon in her mouth. If your story is about the homeless man, exactly how long has he been homeless? A man who's recently lost his job won't view the streets with the familiarity of a person who's been homeless for years.

Although at this level we are beginning to see some of the attitudes of our characters, the questioning up to this point only begins to scratch the surface. Therefore, any mannerisms or traits attached now will remain too generic. But it's just so doggone tempting to stop here. We figure we know the basic information about our characters, some of their perceptions of life, and we know the story or at least have a general idea of the story. Time to assign a few personality quirks and gestures and get on with the writing.

Not so fast. The fun begins at Level C.

Level #C: Personalizing of the character

At this level you will conclude Step 1 and move on to Steps 2 through 5 of the personalizing process. The character will become a unique person, with inner values and a resulting set of traits and mannerisms not duplicated in anyone else. If you employ an interview list, this is the level at which to ask the deeper questions that move you toward the core of your character. Obviously the answers to the first questions on your list—name, age, position, and so on—will already have been answered in Levels A and B. Your Level C list might include items such as: Was your childhood happy? Unhappy? Why? What are some defining moments in your life? What do you think of when you hear the word "mother"? How about "father"?

If you don't use a set list of interview questions for your characters, that's fine, too. You can still get to know your character by asking questions that naturally follow the answers you've received in Levels A and B. This is akin to the give-and-take conversation in making a new acquaintance in real life. That person tells you something; you respond with a question for more detail. You're told more, and you respond with yet another question.

For example, let's return to one of the characters mentioned above—the newly rich woman. Continuing the line of questioning you began in Level B, you might specifically ask: Would she view money as less important or more important than a woman who was born to it? Again, the trick is to play out each line of questioning until you hit bottom. Say you continue questioning your newly rich woman about her money, finding out just how important it is to her. You find it is indeed *very* important. You probe further along these lines. Is the money more important than friends? Family? How differently would she feel about herself if she didn't have money? *Very differently,* she admits; *my self-identity would be gone.* Gone? you repeat. *Afraid so,* she says. *I guess I define myself a lot by my wealth.* Aha! You've just hit bottom—the "So what?"—with this line of questioning (Step 2). You've discovered one of the core truths of your character: her self-worth is based not on who she is or what she's

done, but what she *has*. This "inner value" lies at the very heart of your character and will drive many of her actions and desires.

On to Step 3. Now that you know your character bases her self-worth on her money, how will this inner value translate into outward attitudes? In other words, what trait will naturally result? Question your character further until this trait is revealed. You may discover she is proud, perhaps even given to bragging, about her wealth. Or perhaps you'll find that she is tightfisted, for if she ever lost her money, what would she be? The key here is not to leave this step until you understand how the inner value will directly affect your character's outward personality.

Once you've discovered the trait linked to your character's inner value, proceed to Step 4. Continue with the same line of questioning to see if you can hit bottom a second time. If you do, you'll discover one or more specific mannerisms tied to the inner value. For example, you might ask, with a self-worth based on money, what she has spent her money on. Probe this a bit. Let's say you discover she's bought herself a large diamond ring that she absolutely adores. She wears it all the time. This information has singled out her hands, putting you almost to a second bottom, but not quite yet. What else do you know about her hands? Is she proud of them? Are her fingers long and beautifully tapered or stubby and wrinkled? Perhaps she tells you they're not as attractive as she'd like, even though the nails are groomed and polished. This fact bothers her, and if it weren't for the ring, which is a sign of the wealth by which she defines herself, she wouldn't choose to draw attention to her hands.

Now you can ask her which of these two desires will supersede the other—her desire to avoid drawing attention to her hands or her desire to show off the ring? *Show off the ring,* she replies.

This is the second and final bottom of this line of questioning. At this point, you can proceed to personalizing Step 5. After all your probing, your knowledge of this character can now translate into specifics of how she will use her hands. She may talk with them, spread her fingers in graceful poses, rest them on the table at dinner rather than in her lap. Or she may have the mannerism of tapping a

nail against her cheek as she's pondering something, or on a table when she's frustrated.

For another example of the personalizing process, let's return to the young Marine recruit whom we left in Level B. Say through questioning in Level C you discover that this young man feels he can never measure up to his father's and grandfather's expectations. You then might ask: What's his definition of measuring up? Perhaps he tells you that measuring up means a lifetime career in which he attains the rank of general, and it means upholding honor and integrity as expected of a strong Marine. That's a mighty lofty definition. You could probe more about how he formed it. What part came from his father? What part came from his grandfather? The character's responses might surprise you. For instance, the part about attaining the rank of general may not necessarily have come from the grandfather. You might ask about your character's relationships with these two men. To which man does he feel closer? Does he think he has more to prove to his father or grandfather? Where is his mother in all of this?

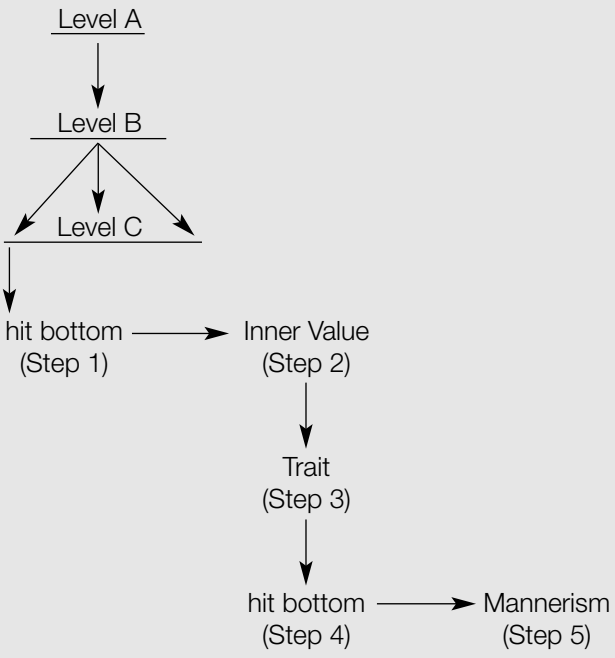
Let's say through all of this questioning you discover that your character has a difficult relationship with both men because of their constantly pushing him to achieve. The grandfather has always been dissatisfied with the performance of his own son, your character's father. And the grandfather has now placed some high expectations regarding honor and integrity firmly upon your character's shoulders. Further, your character's father seeks his own redemption in the old man's eyes through his son's accomplishments. The father is the one who has decided that the young man must become a general.

Now you are at the bottom of this line of questioning (Step 1) . You can pose the "So what?" question. Ask the character: Which is more important, the showing of integrity or becoming a general? What if telling the truth about a certain situation meant that he would be passed over for a promotion? Which would he choose? Let's say the character answers: *If I knew I wouldn't be discovered, I'd lie rather than lose the chance for promotion, because if I can reach the rank of general, I'll prove myself both to my father and my grandfather.*

Aha—once again a major discovery! The character's answer has revealed an inner value (Step 2): External accomplishments pursued for the approval of two other people—his father and grandfather—are more important than personal integrity. Remember that this inner value will drive the character's emotions and actions.

You can now probe further to find what trait will result from this inner value (Step 3). Perhaps the young man will appear overly zealous in all he does, even to the point of being foolhardy, in order to achieve. Or perhaps he'll be just the opposite—reluctant and cautious because he fears failure.

Once you discover the trait, continue with the questioning to see if you can hit bottom again and reveal a specific mannerism (Steps 4 and 5). If the trait is that the character borders on foolhardiness in order to prove himself, you might ask: How does he handle nervous energy when he faces a challenge? Does he try to hide it so he can appear calm, cool, and collected? If so, how well does he



manage this? Even if he hides his nervousness well, is there a vulnerable part of his body to which the energy naturally flows? Perhaps he broke an arm by falling off a bicycle when he was too young to ride a two-wheeler—one of those early failures at trying to achieve for the sake of his father's approval. The memory still eats at him, and as a result, he unconsciously flexes that arm when he's nervous. Or perhaps his thumb twitches as a result of some other experience you uncover.

Once you've gone through all five personalizing steps with one line of questioning, start the process all over again by going back to Level B and picking up another line of questioning until you again hit bottom and discover another inner value. Then probe your character until you discover the resulting trait and mannerism(s). Continue your questioning in this way until you have discovered all the inner values, traits, and mannerisms of your character that you possibly can. Your character will then be a unique, personalized individual.

As you go through this process with your character, keep these three important points in mind:

1. *The personalizing process is not a one-shot deal.*

   You will find yourself returning to its steps again and again. No matter how diligently you follow the process, characters just don't reveal themselves all at once. As you write your novel, they'll hint at new facts about themselves, opening up new lines of questioning for you to follow. Take the time to go through the process again. No doubt you'll discover new truths about your character.

2. *Your character's inner values are not separate entities.*

   Sometimes they work together to produce resulting traits. Sometimes they mitigate each other. As an example, let's return to the newly rich woman with the inner value that her self-worth is tied to her money. This inner value could result in the trait of acting proud or even flaunting her wealth. However, as you pursue other lines of questioning, you might discover that she also

possesses the inner value of placing the utmost importance on other people's approval. What will be the result of these two inner values working together? It depends on which one is stronger. If the need for approval is stronger, when this woman is with others who don't value or possess money as she does, she may tone down her flaunting in order to gain their approval. Or if she's with others who are wealthy, she may flaunt all the more to be accepted. (In Secret #4, "Coloring Passions," we will discuss in more detail how inner values work together to create the many different shades of a trait.)

3. *The personalizing process can work backward.*

   Let's say right off the bat your character tells you he doesn't walk; he strides like a superhero on a mission. Don't respond, "No, no, I'm not supposed to know that yet." Instead, ask him why. Trace that mannerism back through the personalizing steps to the bottom of a line of questioning (Step 1), then work your way up that line of questioning from Level C to B to A. In other words, simply reverse the arrows on our chart. When you do this, one of two things will happen. Either you will discover the inner value that supports that superhero stride or you will find that you've misheard your character, for the truths you uncover will not support that manner of walking. In the latter case, be ruthless about tossing that stride aside, for if you insist on keeping it, you won't be true to the character.

This last point leads us to our next discussion—a more specific look at your character's mannerisms.

Putting the Spark of Life into Your Character's Mannerisms

Through the personalizing process, we've seen how you can discover the mannerisms based on your character's inner values. You have built your character from the inside out. You are now ready to put

that final spark of life into your character's mannerisms. But first, two questions: Just how many mannerisms should your character have? And, does *every* mannerism have to be tied to an inner value?

As to the first question, no specific number of mannerisms for a character exists. Instead, use this general guideline: A character should display only as many mannerisms as are necessary to convey what is important about him or her without distracting from the story and the character's role within it.

You do not need to find mannerisms for every part of your character's body. Certain ones will appear as important. These will dominate and define your character. For example, one character may have a very distinctive walk, while another's walk is not distinctive enough to note. Or one may speak in a whiny voice while another's voice isn't particularly unusual. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that the more mannerisms your character has, the more defined he or she will be. The opposite is true. Too many mannerisms can lead to a "muddied" effect, just as too many colors blended together create a dull gray-brown. The *quality* of mannerisms is far more important than their *quantity*.

Some characters are more "colorful" in nature than others. These characters are fun, but you must be all the more careful not to overload them with mannerisms. Colorful characters typically aren't that way because they have *more* personalized traits, but because the personalized traits they do have tend to be extreme. "Over the top," we might say. A character loaded with too many over-the-top mannerisms will go from being pleasantly colorful to just plain unbelievable.

Now to the second question. Does every mannerism have to rise from an inner value? The definitive answer is "yes and no."

More mannerisms will rise from your character's inner values than you might think. Go through the personalizing process *first*. See what mannerisms your character displays to you. Then, as you get to know your character better and better in the process of writing your novel, you may find a certain mannerism creeping into his or her actions that was not a direct result of the personalizing process. However, since you've gone through the process and know your charac-

ter well, this mannerism will likely be truthful to the character. The danger in clinging to this question's "no" answer lies in falling back into the habit of merely "dressing the mannequin." You want to avoid slapping on a hasty mannerism just because you think your character needs more.

As you discover your character's mannerisms, you'll want to infuse them with that final spark of life. The best way to do this is to draw ideas for moving, talking, walking, from the world around you. Watch people constantly. It's as simple—and as life-consuming—as that.

> Start a mannerism file, using the world around you.

The idea of observing others is nothing new to novelists. We pay it lip service all the time. But how often do we really put our people-watching skills to work? Often we become so busy *writing* that we forget to replenish ourselves with new, vital input. Where to gather these snippets of humanity? Everywhere. Watch people in cars, bars, and restaurants; in airports and buses and train stations; at work and at play; in stadium bleachers and church pews; at weddings and funerals; at dances, parties, school, stores; in their own homes and while traveling. Watch family, friends, and strangers alike. Watch yourself. Watch people standing in line, hailing a cab, yelling at another driver, hugging a loved one, laughing, eating, sitting, walking, talking, reacting. This constant observation of human nature simply can't be stressed enough.

A year ago I sat in a classroom trying desperately to push my right-brained mind into left-brained mode as the teacher lectured about aerodynamics and all manner of mathematical marvels involved in flight. But the student in front of me kept drawing my attention. He had the most interesting way of slouching in his seat, one shoulder raised to an uncanny level above the other, neck thrust forward and head held at an angle—somewhat like a hunchbacked bird listening for a worm. My fingers itched to write down that

posture. How could I possibly concentrate on the teacher with this captivating sight before me?

We all need a way of recording such observations, no matter how facile our memories. Some authors carry small notepads or index cards for jotting things down on the spot. Others file observations away in their memories during the day, then write them in a journal at night.

In addition to watching people for mannerisms, don't forget other sources of ideas such as magazine pictures, voices over the phone or radio, characters in movies or plays, and descriptions in books. You can even glean ideas from animals and cartoon figures, adapting them to fit human nature. In one of the examples following this chapter, you'll see how a modern novelist uses a bear's hulking stance to describe a character.

You don't need to copy directly from these sources, and in some cases you shouldn't. But any one of them can springboard to that unique mannerism that is true to your character's inner values. Take a little here, a little there, blend, and create something new.

The result? A character who is vibrantly alive, whose facial expressions and movements reflect his or her core truths. A character that would please Stanislavsky himself.

Becoming More Familiar with the Process

When it comes right down to it, personalizing isn't all that difficult. It just takes time. We need to go through the steps carefully: questioning our characters to find an inner value, discovering the trait to which it leads, then discovering any specific mannerisms that may result. Unfortunately, many of us excel at only part of this process. We may have a great list of interview questions for our characters, but stop before putting the answers to their best and deepest use. Or we may boast an incredible mannerism collection gained through notes and pictures, but blithely sift through the pile, select a few, and slap them on our characters.

One of the best ways to completely familiarize yourself with the personalizing process is to personalize yourself. You might start at the

beginning of the process and first discover your inner values, or you might start with a trait or mannerism and work your way backward. As you learn about yourself and how closely your own traits, mannerisms, and inner values are tied together, you'll better understand how effective this process can be in creating your characters.

Another interesting exercise in learning this process is to choose main characters from two different novels you have read—one character whom you felt was fully formed and believable, and another whom you found to be shallow. Then use the working backward technique to see how well their mannerisms and traits are tied to inner values that are clearly displayed through their actions. You will probably find that the trail of a believable character's mannerisms goes all the way back to the beginning of the personalizing process, while the trail of the shallow character's mannerisms leads nowhere.

The beauty of this personalizing secret is that the process creates the entire character, both inside and out. Still, this is only the beginning. In the following chapters, we'll see how the inner values and traits you've found through personalizing can lay the foundation for even further discoveries about your character.

Study Samples

In these scenes we find examples of characters ranging from someone we might meet on the street to a more colorful type, both exemplified by only a few unique, personalized mannerisms.

FROM

David Copperfield

by Charles Dickens

Setting: England, mid-1800s. Dickens is known for his many colorful characters. Here we meet a shopkeeper as a down-and-out David Copperfield hopes to make a sale.

Into this shop, which was low and small, and which was darkened rather than lighted by a little window, overhung

with clothes, and was descended into by some steps, I went with a palpitating heart; which was not relieved when an ugly man, with the lower part of his face all covered with a stubbly grey beard, rushed out of a dirty den behind it, and seized me by the hair of my head. He was a dreadful old man to look at, in a filthy flannel waistcoat, and smelling terribly of rum. His bedstead, covered with a tumbled and ragged piece of patchwork, was in the den he had come from, where another little window showed a prospect of more stinging-nettles, and a lame donkey.

"Oh, what do you want?" grinned this old man, in a fierce, monotonous whine. "Oh, my eyes and limbs, what do you want? Oh, my lungs and liver, what do you want? Oh, goroo, goroo!"

I was so much dismayed by these words, and particularly by the repetition of the last unknown one, which was a kind of rattle in his throat, that I could make no answer; hereupon the old man, still holding me by the hair, repeated:

"Oh, what do you want? Oh, my eyes and limbs, what do you want? Oh, my lungs and liver, what do you want? Oh, goroo!"—which he screwed out of himself, with an energy that made his eyes start in his head.

"I wanted to know," I said, trembling, "if you would buy a jacket."

"Oh, let's see the jacket!" cried the old man. "Oh, my heart on fire, show the jacket to us! Oh, my eyes and limbs, bring the jacket out!"

With that he took his trembling hands, which were like the claws of a great bird, out of my hair; and put on a pair of spectacles, not at all ornamental to his inflamed eyes.

"Oh, how much for the jacket?" cried the old man, after examining it. "Oh—goroo! How much for the jacket?"

"Half-a-crown," I answered, recovering myself.

"Oh, my lungs and liver," cried the old man, "no! Oh, my eyes, no! Oh, my limbs, no! Eighteenpence. Goroo!"

Every time he uttered this ejaculation, his eyes seemed

to be in danger of starting out; and every sentence he spoke, he delivered in a sort of tune, always exactly the same, and more like a gust of wind, which begins low, mounts up high, and falls again, than any other comparison I can find for it.

"Well," said I, glad to have closed the bargain, "I'll take eighteenpence."

"Oh, my liver!" cried the old man, throwing the jacket on a shelf. "Get out of the shop! Oh, my lungs, get out of the shop! Oh, my eyes and limbs—gorooo! Don't ask for money; make it an exchange."

I never was so frightened in my life, before or since; but I told him humbly that I wanted money, and that nothing else was of any use to me, but that I would wait for it, as he desired, outside, and had no wish to hurry him. So I went outside, and sat down in the shade in a corner. And I sat there so many hours, that the shade became sunlight, and the sunlight became shade again, and still I sat there waiting for my money. . . .

He made many attempts to induce me to submit to an exchange: at one time coming out with a fishing-rod, at another with a fiddle, at another with a cocked hat, at another with a flute. But I resisted all these overtures, and sat there in desperation; each time asking him with tears in my eyes for my money or my jacket. At last he began to pay me in halfpence at a time; and was full two hours getting by easy stages to a shilling.

"Oh, my eyes and limbs!" he then cried, peeping hideously out of the shop, after a long pause, "will you go for twopence more?"

"I can't," I said; "I shall be starved."

"Oh, my lungs and liver, will you go for threepence?"

"I would go for nothing, if I could," I said, "but I want the money badly."

"Oh, go-roo!" (It is really impossible to express how he twisted this ejaculation out of himself, as he peeped around

the doorpost at me, showing nothing but his crafty old head.) "Will you go for fourpence?"

I was so faint and weary that I closed with this offer; and taking the money out of his claw, not without trembling, went away more hungry and thirsty than I had ever been, a little before sunset.

Exploration Points

1. How many unique mannerisms does this shopkeeper have?

   Every movement of this shopkeeper is extreme. He doesn't walk; he rushes. He doesn't greet; he seizes by the hair of the head. He grins rather than smiles and whines in a strange tune rather than talks. His speech is far too excited for the circumstance, and what's more, he repeats the crazy things he says as if to outdo his manic self. He rattles a strange sound in his throat—"Goroo!" Sometimes his eyes bug out of his head as he does so. Nervous energy flows into his hands, making them tremble.

   Dickens has done a great job of making me feel David Copperfield's intimidation. I certainly wouldn't want to find myself at the mercy of this strange man.

2. How has Dickens's description added to these wild mannerisms?

   A writer less facile than Dickens may not be able to create a believable character with this many eccentricities. To achieve believability, Dickens has used description of the shop's surroundings in some unique ways.

   The entire shop appears haphazard and chaotic, a reflection of the keeper's appearance and actions. The room is cramped, and the space is stuffed with hanging clothes. In the very first sentence, instead of saying a window is dirty, Dickens describes it as darkening rather than lighting the room. His choice of words sets up the unpredictability that David Copperfield will face in meeting the owner of this place. Dickens carries the win-

dow description further by noting that a second one displays not a pretty garden, but weeds that badly prick and a crippled donkey. As a result, we're not surprised to see that the shopkeeper is ugly, unshaven, dirty, and smelling of alcohol. And we're poised to more easily believe the man's crazed mannerisms of speech, bugging eyes, rattling throat, and trembling hands.

3. From what inner value(s) do you think these mannerisms spring?

   According to E. M. Forster's definition of flat and round characters, this shopkeeper is flat. He may have many mannerisms, but he's constructed around a single idea or inner value, and he doesn't change. Every mannerism Dickens has attributed to him leads back to this man's inner value: making a fast, hard buck is all that matters. At first it appears that this man is stupid; he allows himself and his shop to appear so frightful that customers immediately want to leave. But toward the end of the scene, we see the man's cunning. I get the feeling that his appearance and wild actions are quite purposeful. They're all designed to give him the upper hand in transactions. If he'd immediately and quietly declared to his young customer that he would only make an exchange for the jacket or pay hardly anything, perhaps David Copperfield would have left in a hurry. Instead, the shopkeeper leads David on, all the while displaying his wildness, until the boy is frightened into practically giving the jacket away.

FROM

Compelling Evidence

by Steve Martini

Setting: present day. Attorney Paul Madriani waits in a bar to meet his ex-boss and mentor, Ben Potter. This is our introduction to Potter.

Then I see him moving from a table in the dining room toward the bar. Ben Potter. Tall, well over six feet, though I doubt he's ever been accurately measured. He has one of

those frames, the shoulders rounded and hunched forward a little, the gait just slightly lumbering. He wears his usual dark vested sweater under his suit coat. Together with his bearing, this wrinkled bulk projects the image of some mighty bear aimlessly foraging for meat tied in a tree. He has managed to exploit this awkward posture, coin it as his own, so that a generation of law students who have studied under him in the evenings at the university now mimic this style when addressing juries. It's an attitude that on Ben is not tired or aging, but stately, deliberative.

Exploration Points

1. How does this character's choice of clothing work with his mannerisms to create a visual picture?

   Martini uses only two sentences to describe Ben Potter's clothing, yet they add much to his character. The "dark" and "wrinkled bulk" of layered clothing adds to the sense of corpulence, helping us envision a large bear. The word "usual" is well used. Within its own sentence, it merely tells us that Ben Potter always dresses this way without implying why. But paired with the phrase, "He has managed to exploit this awkward posture," the word "usual" takes on a whole new meaning, allowing us to see the deliberateness of Ben Potter's choice of clothing and actions.

2. What possible inner value might lead this character to "exploit [his] awkward posture"?

   Martini adds another interesting phrase to help us quickly envision Ben Potter: "so that a generation of law students who have studied under him in the evenings at the university now mimic this style when addressing juries." Suddenly we see Ben Potter not as some aging man who doesn't care to dress well or stand up straight, but as a teacher who is so authoritative, so impressive,

that his students have taken his awkward mannerisms out of the classroom and into the courtroom, mimicking them while defending or prosecuting cases. This leads me to think, based solely on this passage, that Potter's corresponding inner value is a deep love and respect for the justice system. As a result of this inner value, he employs everything he can, including his unusual stance and gait, to impress upon his students the importance of learning every bit of information he presents.

Moving On

So now what?

After going through the personalizing process, you're beginning to understand your characters pretty well. Knowing your characters is important, but it's not an end in itself. Their inner values will play a big part in building your story. To see how your characters' unique inner values can create action and conflict within your novel, we turn to Secret #2: Action Objectives.