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WRITING GREAT FICTION -- 3/24/17

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Today's selection -- from Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters by [CONTACT US \(CONTACT-US.PHP\)](#)

Michael Tierno. The Greek philosopher Aristotle's book *Poetics* has given countless writers a guidepost for creating great fiction:

"One of the many things we can thank Aristotle for is his writings on how to create characters that seem both realistic *and* able to captivate an audience. First, make them good enough that we can root for them. Second, make them 'appropriate,' meaning give them characteristics that make sense for the type of person they are. Third, make them human -- give them flaws or quirks that make us believe that they exist. Finally, whatever characteristics you do give them, make sure you keep them there throughout the length of the screenplay. As Aristotle says, make sure they are 'consistently inconsistent!...

"Additionally, he gives us five principles of life that we can use to create character in our stories:

1. Nutritive Life
2. Desiring Life
3. Sensitive Life
4. Locomotion
5. Capacity for Rational Thought

"Because these five principles all belong to the makeup of a real-life person's 'psychology,' they can be used to create convincing three-dimensional characters. Let's examine each one.

" 1. **Nutritive Life.** Do you wonder about your characters' eating habits? Wouldn't that tell you (and your audience) a lot about them? Don't your eating habits say a lot about you? You should brainstorm as much as you can to get a clear picture of what the eating habits of your characters might be, to gather clues about who they are. How do they eat, what do they eat? Do they think about food a lot? What do your characters' refrigerators look like? Not that any of this ever has to make it to the page, but it's a window into their character. I mean, when Rocky gets up at 4 a.m. and drinks four raw eggs, isn't that worth a gazillion pages of psychological notes on him? That image is so powerful and evocative that you know without further elaboration that he is serious about this boxing match. Look at Lester Burnham [in the Oscar-winning *American Beauty*]. What does he eat? By the end of his transformation



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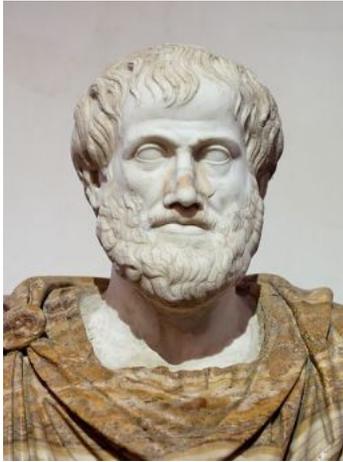
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from miserable mid-life-crisis guy to seeker of eternal youth, he's blending and drinking health drinks. What could tell us more about Lester's new attitude toward life? What could make Lester seem more human?



(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Hamilton)

**Roman copy in marble of a Greek bronze bust of
Aristotle by Lysippus, c. 330 BC**

" 2. **Desiring Life.** At the heart of all action is the desire of the hero. Basic human desire is really what makes characters come alive on the screen. In *The Godfather*, when Michael Corleone goes to Italy and falls in love with an Italian woman from the mountains, doesn't that make him seem truly alive? It's a probable incident that flows with the action, reflecting his deep commitment to his Italian 'roots.' In *Gladiator*, Maximus yearns to go home to his family and, after they have been murdered, to join them in eternity. In *The Blair Witch Project*, the kids' ambition to tape the Blair Witch and make a film leads them to their death. Desiring is at the heart of what it means to be a living, breathing human being.

" 3. **Sensitive Life.** It goes without saying that our five senses are a big part of being alive. If a human being faces the prospect of losing sight or hearing, it's devastating. In fact, all of the five senses -- sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste -- define our lives at the most basic level. Lester Burnham spends a lot of time masturbating, doesn't he? In fact, it's how we are first introduced to him. What more do we need to sense that Lester is real and to 'know' who he is? In cinema, perhaps the most important sense in regard to character development is visual perception. Great screenwriters know how to feed information to the audience through the eyes of characters, such as when Lester sees Angela at the pep rally and fantasizes about her. Showing how characters actually see things with their own eyes enables the audience to experience 'causes' of the action.

It also puts to use a powerful aspect of the cinematic medium, which is the hero's literal point of view.

" 4. **Locomotion.** Carefully depicting movement is vital to a screenplay. For

example, *The Blair Witch Project* is a tapestry of rest and locomotion, in which the characters' use of their eyes and ears is also notably important. Heather, the lead character in the story, spends a lot of time running around, screaming, and trying to videotape the ground in front of her. The lifelike aspect of all the characters is transmitted largely by their physical movement, as they trudge through the woods.

"5. **Capacity for Rational Thought.** Thinking about the mind and thought processes of people can be a fun way to brainstorm characters into existence. In *Annie Hall*, Alvie is a rational man who has bouts of irrationality. This surfaces when a cop pulls him over and he tears up his license. In *Titanic* Rose jumps from the lifeboat to return to Jack, a slightly more irrational than rational act -- but hey, this is a love story, and romantic love is rooted as much in animal nature as it is in the higher mind. (Rose is also slightly larger than life, and she's being consistent with what we've seen of her.)

"In summary, to create a real human being for an audience you must have them do things that convince the audience that they are alive, really alive, giving details that even a scientist like Aristotle would appreciate."



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