

Q7 Question 7. With reference to production and story elements discuss the introduction of the 2 main characters and explain

How they were established and developed
Their motivations and result of their actions
Their relationship with other characters

Read this first

Character Development

We are normally introduced to the main protagonist at the start of the narrative. From this point onwards we learn more about who they are. It is important for the audience to relate to the main characters and to understand why characters act in the way they do.

There are 3 aspects to character in narrative

- Establishment
- Development
- Motivation

Through the use of a range of story and production elements characters in narratives come to life. The way in which a main character is introduced to the audience is very important.

In many narratives characters are established as stock or common characters. This is particularly the case in genre texts. Audiences recognise character types, the good guy, the loner, the femme fatale, the innocent abroad, the geek- the tough guy- the list goes on. Stock characters mean that a director can assume that the audience has some pre existing knowledge and experience of character types and can use this knowledge to cut straight to the action without having to explain each character in detail

The way in which a character is further developed in the film is the aspect that engages an audience. Characters are often created with a blend of familiar types and character traits with new features to intrigue an audience.

Character development will usually be based on motivation. Motivations may revolve around the thoughts and actions of a character or it may involve the way the character is positioned with the scene. Production elements will be used to highlight aspects of motivation; lighting for example can highlight the choice of which prop a character may pick up

D-FENS

Foster the engineer finds himself stuck in a traffic jam in a "tunnel" —actually, in this instance, below a freeway overpass. The incident represents his current crisis, where he's "stalled" in his career in a nightmare confluence of machines and human insects. Forever the victim of American realism — has to abandon his small import and walk away.

Driver: (shouts) Hey where do you think you're going? Foster: I'm going home.

Thus begins his fatal journey across the under-belly of Los Angeles, in fact, Foster has no home to return to, as he's separated from his wife and daughter and - as we come to learn - under a court restraining order to stay away. But, like an Oedipal homing pigeon, Foster heads for the coastal district of Venice. It's his little girl Adele's birthday and nothing will stop him from going "home".

Dressed in a short-sleeved white shirt and tie, wearing dress slacks and packing a briefcase, Foster is the generic white male professional. With his glasses and shirt pocket pens, his demeanor is one of wasp determination and righteous anger. He stops at a seedy corner grocery for a Coke, gets into a confrontation with the oriental proprietor.

When the proprietor comes after him with a baseball bat, Foster disarms him and proceeds to wreck the shop in a funny lesson on price fixing, inflation and banditry. He renegotiates the price of his Coke to fifty cents, then leaves with his first weapon, a bat which is now a club.

His second weapon is acquired when he crosses into a Hispanic neighborhood and is accosted by two Chicano punks. They demand his briefcase as a lull, and when he demurs, threaten him with a switchblade knife. Using his briefcase and his bat, he sends them running after a brief skirmish - and pockets the switchblade.

He's moving up on the evolutionary ladder.

He acquires a sports bag full of pistols and automatics when the Chicano gang tries to assassinate him as he's on the phone to his wife. As they roar past, strafing the phone kiosk from their torpedo-back Chevy, they manage to hit innocent pedestrians and shop windows in a grotesque carnage of teenage stupidity and hormonal duplicity. Foster hangs up, picks his way through the bodies, finds the Chevy has wrecked itself against a parked car around the corner. The punks lie sprawled, bloody and broken, automatics on the tarmac.

Now Foster becomes a true vigilante. He shoots one of the punks in the leg before collecting the bag of guns and walking away....

The deterioration of American society is in evidence everywhere. From the decaying buildings and lousy service, to the liars and cheats who panhandle rather than work - everywhere Foster goes, he's confronted by the rot, the anarchy, the spiritual malaise.

"I reserve the right!"

The hole in his shoe is like the hole in his life. When he enters the Surplus Store, he enters an emporium of Evil which is presided over by a version of what he might become - a Nazi. Frederic Forrest is outstanding as the proprietor of this museum of surplus goods and war memorabilia. He's been listening to the radio reports of Foster's rampage, quickly recognizes and welcomes him as a kindred white apostle in the fight against gays, blacks, jews, the immigrant hordes... and, of course, the police. Foster now peaks in his weapons evolution: "Heat-seeking fuckin' disposable... i want you to have it." A portable shoulder missile launcher, loaded, ready to go. Why? "'cause you're like me," says the Nazi. But no, Foster is not like him and Disputes his bigotry. They fight. The Nazi smashes the gift Foster bought as a Birthday present for his daughter (the glass snowball), an act that pushes him over the edge, the final destruction of innocence.

With the determination and nihilism of the truly angry, Foster stabs the Nazi with the switchblade, then shoots him with an automatic. It's self-defence... but it's also an execution. Foster has made that familiar American move into judgement, violence and imperialism. But is he wrong?

He enters wearing a white shirt, exits wearing a black shirt. He enters wearing shoes, exits wearing boots. He enters packing a Tech 9 automatic, exits packing a heat-seeking missile launcher. Now he's a mixed-metaphor, a white champion in a black dress, a victim of history, an evolutionary misfit.

When he uses the missile to clear a way through a street works project, the action is a parody of popular action film and television drama, an absurdity waiting to happen in real life. Instructed by a black kid ("saw it on TV"), Foster sets up the launcher. It fires precipitously, the missile travelling along a trench, eventually blowing up an excavator. Cool. Yeah.

The finale is a clever reworking of the standard cornered criminal routine. The two white men face off as they have so many times in so many westerns and so many cop shows. Duvall faces Douglas, Pendergast faces Foster, two versions of the same past. "I'm the bad guy - how did that happen?" exclaims Foster as he stands with his back to the railing of the pier, the ocean and infinity. It seems so. He goes for his gun... but now he's armed only with his daughter's water pistol. Pendergast (regretfully) shoots him and Foster topples backwards into the water.

It's suicide - the preferred choice of those failed by their institutions and their families. As Foster floats with his hands outstretched in the water, he drifts alone in the sea which gently carries him away

Detective Prendergast experiences many of the same feelings and losses. We do not see as many daily frustrations he encounters, but we can certainly see his problems and pressures. His unstable wife calls continuously to bother him at work, her calls obviously more a demand for attention than anything else. Although he loves her, there is a fair amount of guilt between them; she lost her figure for him (and their child); he gave up being a street cop because she couldn't handle it. Their one child died from a known but unexplained cause, SIDS. And now he is retiring early for his wife.



Det. Prendergast with his one friend on the police force.

His alienation isn't as bad as it is for D-FENS, but then again he is still employed. But his job has a dark, impersonal side, as seen in his interaction with Captain Yardley. Like D-FENS, Prendergast's superior barely knows his name, and nothing about him personally. All he knows, or wants to know, is what's in his personnel file. Here is the exchange with Prendergast in the captain's office:

Yardley: "Will you stick with the team?" Prendergast: "No, Captain, I don't think I will." Yardley: "Well, like I said, they make me ask, you understand . . . how are the kids,

*by the way?" Prendergast: "I don't have any." Yardley: "I'd like to take my stick to some of these clerks—the file says—" Prendergast: "We lost a child." Yardley: "Lost it?" Prendergast: "Her. Lost **her**." Yardley: "Yes, of course. It's rough." Prendergast: "Well, it can be . . ." (silence) Yardley: "Still married, right?" Prendergast: "Yes, sir, I am." (silence) Yardley: "Well, that's good . . . that's good." Prendergast: "Yes..."*

At the end of this exchange, director Joel Schumacher adds a brilliant touch: a lingering, painful, unnecessary extra few moments. This is the first of two (the other is of Barbara Hershey at the end of explaining her ex-husband's potential for violence). Duvall is given extra screen time to show his discomfort and alienation. He sits more or less motionless, using just his facial expression and eyes to reveal his alienation and discomfort.

Captain Yardley feels that Prendergast is a disgrace to the police force, because he took a desk job after being wounded. A big, bad, tough cop, we first see him working over his punching bag in his office. He tells Prendergast to "get back behind the desk where you belong" and tells him not to pretend he's "a cop." He also states that he doesn't trust Prendergast because he doesn't swear. "A real man swears," he says, getting in his face. Prendergast takes the abuse quietly and passively. At the end of the film, though, he tells the captain, in front of a television camera crew, "Fuck you, Captain. Fuck you very much."

Both D-FENS and Prendergast are among the walking wounded. They both have family on their minds, and, at the very end, all each of them wants to do is get back to their families. Both have to live in the same city and deal with unstable people close to them. Both men are at a crossroads in their lives; D-FENS faces his second month out of work and his daughter's first birthday without him. Prendergast is about to reluctantly "watch the cactus grow" in retirement in Lake Havasu, Arizona. Both have noble intentions but are misunderstood by those around them. D-FENS is thought variously to be a thief, a racist vigilante, and a hostage taker. Prendergast must deal with his coworkers and captain, who think he is at his desk job because he was wounded in action, when in fact he did it for his wife's mental stability.