

STORY ROLES

The word 'role' comes from the French **rotula**, that is, a scroll which rolls and unrolls, like a script for a theater production. But roles have not been limited to those who stand before the footlights. You and I are engaged in roles -- daily!

You may have heard someone speak of role-playing as if it were something bad-- sort of a con, something to hide behind in order to exploit the unwary. But we look at roles differently. **We cannot not-play roles.** Consider your roles at home: have you parents or children there? Maybe a spouse or lover? Consider the place where you work: if you are not the boss, you're sure to have one, and colleagues whose tasks dove-tail with yours. You've been to school, or maybe you're still going: this brings in teachers, secretaries, clerks, staff and students. Vacation season calls upon our playing the role of guest or host, traveller, gourmet, waiter or patron. At the market, you buy, sell, or window-shop.

Are any of these roles bad? No, although they can be done badly. Is taking a role like putting on a suit of clothes? We do dress up for some roles, such as police, soldier, nurse, clown -- or just as predictably, to 'join the Easter parade,' or to receive an award. Characteristic dress signals anyone who needs to know what they may expect of us, and where uniforms are not required, the place where we're found, and the demeanor we show provides a ready basis for interaction.

Does the role disguise the self? The role does much more than that. The role **presents** the self, and those instances where the intent is conceal more than to reveal, this too presents the self, perhaps in the role of salesperson, gracious hostess, international spy or weary listener. The role I take is a statement about **who I am and what I do.**

Moreover, the roles we take involve us with each other. Indeed, how could I play most of the roles I play without someone to play the opposite role with me? Of course there are roles we may, if we choose, play alone, such as **physiological roles**, the role of the eater, sleeper, and -- is there an infant at home? crier. No baby can survive in those beginning physiological roles for very long without a care-giver at hand. Even a hermit requires a world which is willing to let him be. What about the role of homeless street person?

How do you feel about taking the bystander role? So even here one role makes the other possible. Less obvious are the **psychodramatic roles** of life, unless you are in tune with children, who need not cover-up their pretending. So the little girl rocks and sings to her dolly without involving you at all, unless she knows you well enough to invite you into her play, or to ask your opinion. Of course you join in, with pretend seriousness, supplying band-aids for babies who hurt themselves. When she's just a bit older, looking out the classroom window deep in a daydream, without even seeing the beautiful day, she still plays psychodramatic roles, but within herself.

Psychodramatic roles are fantasy roles, which call for special characters, such as ghosts, leprechauns, spirits, demons and gods. Are the roles of psychodrama psychodramatic roles? Yes, indeed. The auxiliaries represent your cast in their absence. You take them to where they have been, will be, or may never be, as if it were happening at the moment on stage. The audience is a more kindly world, the double a more outspoken self, and the director the one who can be trusted to hold everything together -- just for you.

The roles which immediately leap to mind are **social roles**, which were there before we came onto the scene. These are roles we learn to take. Perhaps we've already begun with them as **the father, the mother, the sister, the brother**, when we were involved in the psychodramatic roles of childhood. But now they've lost some of their concreteness, and we're a bit unsure as we feel our way into the role of **a father, a mother, a sister, or a brother.** With each person one gender rather than the other, this cuts down on the available roles by a half!

Social roles begin with **role taking.** We deliberately copy the models at hand, and monitor ourselves closely to see how well we're doing. At last the skill is over-learned and we do other things at the same time, or we vary how we do it, this way rather than that, little concerned with how well we may be performing, and much more concerned with what we may accomplish through doing the role.

When others react to us, their roles depend on our roles. We see ourselves reacting to them, and don't realize the role we're playing belongs to us. The role I've taken is me, and I'm being me in the

role, especially as I take responsibility and suffer consequences. This is to arrive at the stage of role development known as **role playing**. The way I play the role is no carbon copy of the roles I've seen, even though it may bear a kind of family resemblance. Nevertheless, it's now mine; it's who I am. The role is me.

When I am ripe in the social role, having long since taken it, and having fully played it, I may now move beyond the role, making it a platform for **role creating**, coming up with something new, and just as adequate -- even more so, than the role replaced. Perhaps I've put two or more roles together; the combination constitutes an addition to the culture. New roles are always emerging in complex cultures. Where there are so many people, and technical knowledge grows, specialization is inevitable. I grew up in a small town. There were not many roles, and we played a lot of them. Most of these were readily replaceable. If we couldn't get one baby-sitter there was always another to be found. But look at all the roles in a large society. Not just a cook, but a short-order cook, or a gourmet cook.

Don't think of the roles you play as a straight-jacket. One who has occupied a role for a while has earned the right to do what he can with it. When one has earned her wings as role player, then she can look around for what needs to be done and improvise a way to do it. If it works, it will catch on. There are other roles not readily open to everyone:: the millionaire, the suave continental lover...etc. Here's a role you'll not likely play, but some do. No one expects to, but the destiny awaited actor, Christopher Reeve. If you're ever there, remember Frank's psychodrama. He'll show you the way.

Frank psychodrama, age 22 From Sailboat to Wheel-chair

Frank is the only child of a highly successful single mother, who is a well-established, much sought after trial lawyer. Like mother, Frank showed great promise. He was top of his class the first two years of college, but now at the end of his junior year he has shown signs of 'slacking off,' as his mother expressed it. She thought his devotion to athletics and his active social life were a waste of time; they were getting in the way of what was really important. Something happened to Frank this summer, which has threatened to ruin everything.

He had a sailboat accident that put him into a wheelchair for life. Faculty and friends, more alarmed at his decision to quit school than with this poor showing early in the term, pressured Frank into replacing his worst course with introductory psychodrama, often used as a covert way of getting help to students who didn't want it. Not only was psychodrama (supposedly) easier, but it might even change his attitude.

The formerly sociable, amiable, easy-going Frank had become taciturn since the accident, rarely taking any initiative in class discussion. He sat a bit apart from the others in his wheelchair, drawn into himself. In the first session he attended since transferring into psychodrama, a peer made a dramatic break-through. Everyone had been so deeply involved no one noticed the impact on Frank. When he offered to be protagonist next session, his startled peers rallied behind him. He said he'd work on his disability.

1. We began with how things were for him prior to his confinement to a wheelchair. It was hardly news to the class, for his reputation had gone before him. What they'd missed was his beginning revolt against the grind he'd imposed upon himself. He had gone out for track, tennis, and soccer, out-competing experienced players. And he'd discovered girls!

Mother had forbidden his joining his teammates on an excursion to Fort Lauderdale spring break, but he went anyway. He'd had the time of his life, till on the last day there he'd gone sailing, where they'd collided with a drunk in a speedboat, killing the drunk, drowning a friend, and leaving him bobbing about on a rough sea. He awakened to see a foot floating by and was appalled at the discovery the foot was his. There was no feeling in it, and one hand was numb as well. He thought he was doomed when someone from a third boat, who'd seen the whole thing pulled him out. The rescuer tried to be careful, especially after Frank screamed, but the rescuing process probably did additional damage. A peer played Frank's role, readily following his direction.

2. This scene shows Frank as himself lying in a hospital bed. The doctor gives him the test results. Doctor: *There's no way to make this easy. You will probably never walk again.* Frank: *I can't believe that. You mean to tell me that everyone who's ever had my kind of test results has never walked again?*