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Published in:
Journal of Screenwriting

DOI:
[10.1386/josc_00144_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/josc_00144_1)

Published: 01/01/2024

Document Version
Peer-reviewed accepted author manuscript, also known as Final accepted manuscript or Post-print

Please cite the original version:
Robles García, B. J. (2024). How backstory and direct address reformulate the Shakespearean character on television: The case of the missing psychological motivation for House of Cards' Frank Underwood. *Journal of Screenwriting*, 15(2), 169-185. https://doi.org/10.1386/josc_00144_1

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How backstory and direct address reformulate the Shakespearean character on television: The case of the missing psychological motivation for *House of Cards*' Frank Underwood

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Abstract

This article delves into narrative elements of direct address and backstory in television, focusing on *House of Cards* (NETFLIX 2012-2019), Shakespeare's *Richard III*, and *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011-2019). Comparing dramaturgical approaches in stage plays and TV series, the study highlights *House of Cards*' unique incorporation of a pragmatic use of the direct address to create 'worldview' for character exploration. The analysis extends to *Game of Thrones*, emphasizing Tyrion Lannister's self-descriptive addresses revealing a psychological struggle rooted in rejection and backstory.

The article proposes a methodological framework linking first lines or direct addresses to character backstories, emphasizing the role of self-descriptive asides in character creation. It introduces the concept of a 'psychological motivational arc' within character arcs, exploring how direct addresses contribute to nonlinear character development. Concluding with an in-depth examination of *House of Cards*' Frank Underwood, it scrutinizes Willimon's 'show don't tell' approach, questioning its potential limitations on character depth and challenging traditional screenwriting advice. The analysis unravels the interplay between direct address, backstory, and character development in television series, offering insights into evolving narrative techniques and their implications for contemporary screenwriting.

Keywords:

Character creation, break of fourth wall, dialogue, *House of Cards*, Shakespeare, television screenwriting

Date submitted: 21 November 2022; date accepted: TBC.

Introduction

When discussing the television series *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2012-2019), a focal point of interest emerges in the break of the fourth wall or direct address. This aspect has garnered attention from both critics and audiences due to its resemblance to Shakespeare's *Richard III*. The original writer of the homonymous novels confirms this connection, asserting that Shakespeare's *Richard III* and *Macbeth* significantly influenced the novels and the BBC television adaptation (1990). The most prominent similarity between *House of Cards* and *Richard III* lies in the use of monologue or direct address to introduce characters. Beau Willimon, the showrunner of the American version (Netflix, 2012-2019), extensively discusses this dramaturgical device in interviews and talks. While borrowing from Shakespeare with the use of 'direct address,' Willimon describes how he and his team calibrated its use for the main character, Frank Underwood. Their aim was to create a narrative style that avoided extensive psychological explanations, focusing instead on a pragmatic use of direct address (Austin Film Festival, 2015).

Willimon outlines three specific modes for using direct address: worldview, political insight, and humor (Gray Jones, 2013). These modes combined to provide varying levels of exposition, shaping the character and advancing the story while deliberately steering clear of Frank's 'psychological turmoil.' This deliberate distinction from *Richard III*, where emotional exposure is abundant, is highlighted by Willimon, who admits, 'I tried to do that with Frank but it eats up the emotional side; it's better to show it rather than talking it' (Austin Film Festival, 2015: 9:24). This assertion contrasts with an analysis that characterizes *Richard III* as employing soliloquies or direct address to express psychological struggles. The character of *Richard III* is particularly regarded by Bernard J. Paris to be the victim of a 'vindictive personality' because of his physical deformity, which prompts him to regard himself as a 'villain' rather than a lover' (1991:35,36). Paris argues that in *Richard III*'s very first direct address it is possible to dissect what in screenwriting theory is known as a '*backstory*', creating a direct connection between the mention of his physical defects and the traumatic upbringing in which he faced the rejection of others and, mainly, his mother (Paris, 1991). The discrepancy in the use of the direct address between the two formats, stage and television series, triggers questions about the conception of the direct address as a dramaturgical device and how its connection or lack of a backstory might trigger different approaches to character creation that might be useful for screenwriters and practitioners.

Such differences between the use of direct address on stage and in film appear to be supported by the amount of character exposition used in each. However, for television, such a clear boundary does not exist regarding exposing a character's motivation. Hunter describes stage dialogue as 'talking heads' in which exposition is expected but recommends that screenwriters (for film) look for stories that 'scream for visualization' (2004: 18). Most screenwriting advice for film agrees that the device of the 'backstory' should be used sparingly and never highlighted in dialogue. They seem to agree that the screenwriter must know what happened to the character before the story, to create 'story progressions' (McKee, 1997:341), or create traumatic episodes that will eventually become useful (Howard and Mabley, 1993), (Seger, 2011), (Seger, 1990), (Seger, 2010) (Vogler, 2017). They insist that the psychological motivation for a character can be inspired by the backstory, but it should seldom be exposed in dialogue. What is recommended on television is to use a particular style of 'walk-and-talk', that situates the characters in constant

motion while they expose information, hence the name (Aronson, 2010: 448; Bennet, 2012). According to this advice, characters should never sit in one place but constantly move and avoid 'on the nose' dialogue (Hunter, 2004: 124). This creates an interesting point of contention between screenwriting advice meant for film and screenwriting for television, which permits the use of exposition if there is spatial contention. This concession seems to accept that a certain degree of exposition in television should be accepted in dialogue as long as it is carefully planned and movement is added. However, when television has changed at a vertiginous pace and has become more cinematic, several questions arise from the similarities it shares with the stage. As both the stage and television are widely accepted as more expositional than film, the question of how much television dramaturgy should still follow screenwriting advice from film remains open.

Consequently, it is possible to interpret that Willimon's preferred style in the use of direct address aligns with film screenwriting advice, prioritizing the visual sense of storytelling. So, in the first direct address of *House of Cards*, when the word 'pain' was uttered, instead of hinting at emotional pain due to a backstory that was yet to be shown, it corresponded merely to Frank's 'worldview'. Moreover, when Frank's backstory is mentioned later, having his father as the culprit of a violent upbringing, Willimon justifies it as merely describing that Frank's mention of 'pain' was only part of his 'worldview' and explains Frank as being someone who is capable of provoking 'the action that brings pain instead of immobilization and doing nothing, refusing complacency' (Austin Film Festival, 2015: 6:50). Consequently, instead of meaning 'emotional pain' and discussing emotional scars from the past, what Frank really has is a pragmatic life view. Willimon further confirms this when he describes that the constant references of his father were just to show about how politicians show a public side that is very different from the private one (NPR, 2015). Moreover, for Richard, the use of the backstory encapsulated in the figure of his mother throughout the play had a climatic last confrontation scene that did not mean the end of the story, but the end of a long-standing relationship that contributed to Richard's psychological standing.

Given the high degree of discrepancy in the level and type of exposition used in the direct addresses concerning the backstory between *Richard III* and *House of Cards*, it was necessary to introduce a third element of analysis that uses the direct address in correspondence with the backstory in a television series, to identify different connections between these two dramaturgical elements and their impact on character creation in contemporary television screenwriting.

A useful example is Tyrion Lannister from the series *Game of Thrones* (HBO 2011-2019). This character displays dramaturgical qualities similar to Richard's, such as being a rhetorical powerhouse and having experienced the rejection of their parents. Tyrion presents his first powerful line of dialogue exposes his psychological troubles and effectively encapsulating his turbulent relationship with his father, referring to a troubled backstory. Tyrion is a character that is described as a 'dwarf' and tormented by the constant criticism of others towards his physique. Tyrion self-describes as a 'bastard' when facing another bastard in the story, Jon Snow, effectively declaring that 'dwarfs are bastards under their father's eyes' (Game of Thrones S01E #01:43:28). This paves way early in the story a character set up that presents him as verbally articulated, creating a Shakespearean quality that parallels Richard's impressive rhetoric and revealing a hidden a hidden psychological struggle that constantly reacts to parental disapproval. I will show

how this initial self-description of character works for Tyrion not only to present his verbal qualities, but also to provide with similar subtextual fabric of rejection, setting up a connection to the character's backstory. In this way, the use of soliloquies or self-directed lines of dialogue will be demonstrated to be not only pompous, but also part of a character revealing strategy that the screenwriter used to their advantage for later development plot points.

Method

A comparison will be drawn between the use of the character's first lines of dialogue or direct address and their connection to a backstory, demonstrating the importance of self-descriptive direct asides that not only expose the character's backstory but also help to create character. First, I will show how the first direct address or self-descriptive expositional dialogue in both *Richard III* and *Game of Thrones* reveals a distinction between the writer's use of direct address or self-directed dialogue to expose the character's backstory in the present action. I will demonstrate how the first scene of the story serves not only to introduce characters in the physical world but also introduces the backstory in a subtextual manner through dialogue. The mention of backstory continues throughout the story until a climactic turning point.

Richard III

As highlighted before, Richard exposes in the first direct address not only his scheming nature but also foreshadows his character development and blames his physique for his personality. Bernard J. Paris describes the soliloquies from *Henry VI*, as well as the first soliloquy in *Richard III*, as the ones in which Shakespeare shapes Richard's character: 'It is with Richard's soliloquies in 3 *Henry VI* that Shakespeare suddenly emerges as a psychological dramatist, taking us deep inside the psyche of his character and enabling us to understand the formation of his personality and the sources of his behavior' (Paris 1991: 32). Paris affirms that Richard's obsession with his physical deformity is directly addressed in these soliloquies, which harm his outlook of the world 'making him feel unlovable and gives him a sense of being excluded from the human community' (1991: 33). Therefore, the self-descriptive, self-expositional utterance of 'I'm a villain' is in opposition to the adjective of 'lover', as he cannot envision himself as one.

And descant on mine own deformity.

And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,

To entertain these fair well-spoken days

I am determined to prove a villain.

And hate the idle pleasures of these days. (*Richard III*, 1.1)

Furthermore, Paris observes a psychoanalytic diagnostic of Richard's personality, deeming him to be an 'arrogant- vindictive person pursuing vindictive triumphs as a way of retaliating for humiliations suffered in childhood' (1991: 37). As highlighted before, Paris extends his observations by making Richard's mother the culprit of his psychological state. 'One of the chief sources of his negative feelings about himself is his mother'. Paris argues that Richard has always been 'disgracious' in his mother's 'eye' (1991:33). This backstory is constantly brought forward by Richard's mother, as the Duchess of York's words spread out in different scenes, giving the immediate effect that she dislikes her son. Paris elaborates:

Richard has been subjected not only to his mother's rejection, but also, to a widespread, culturally inspired abhorrence of his deformity. Over, and over again, he has been given the message that he is an anomaly, a monstrosity from whom normal people shrink with horror. Even the meek and mild Henry assaults Richard by repeating the stories about how the 'owl shriek'd', the 'crow cried', and 'Dogs howl'd at his birth.' (Paris, 1991:33)

According to Paris' analysis of Richard, his backstory is filled with rejection from his mother which is exposed in different scenes of the play. The Duchess of York asserts her dislike of Richard in the following lines: 'Ah! That deceit should steal such gentle shape, and with a virtuous vizard hide deep vice! He is my son, aye, and therein my shame, yet from my dugs he drew not this deceit' (2.2). She continues when she refers to him as her source of 'shame' and as a 'false glass', involved in a 'malignant death' (2.2). On (4.1) she describes him as an 'ill-dispersing wind of misery' and her womb 'accursed' and the 'bed of death' because it was where a 'cockatrice' (viper) hatched, whose eyes are 'murderous'.

Tyrion Lannister

For Tyrion, the complicated relationship with his father Tywin is also ridden with rejection and serves as an example of a troubling backstory. His self-described identity as a '*bastard*' in the first episode of the series seems to encapsulate these father-son dynamics. Tyrion suffers a fate similar to Richard's, rejected since he was a baby because of his short stature, bringing shame and unwanted attention to his powerful family, the Lannisters. Driven by drinking and self-destructive habits, Tyrion must face his father's constant reprimands for his libertine lifestyle, but they seem to originate from an underlying vein of shame and rejection that challenge Tyrion's legitimacy as a member of a powerful dynasty and ultimately as Tywin's son.

One of the most notorious displays of disregard for Tyrion comes from placing his older son, Jaime, over Tyrion, offering him as a pledge to guarantee the success of a rescue mission, therefore jeopardizing his life (S0109). As the head of his house, he favors his older son's lineage when he refuses Tyrion the rule of the family's home, Casterly Rock (*Game of Thrones* S03E#01), but agrees to pardon his life only after Jaime promises to step up as his son and heir in exchange for Tyrion's life, who is falsely accused of murdering the king.

As the story unfolds, the sting of Tyrion's backstory becomes clear. Passages from Tyrion's youth reveal his father to be responsible for one of Tyrion's most tragic moments. When he was

young, he fell in love and eloped with a girl who was considered to have an inferior birth. This enraged Tywin, who had the bride raped by his soldiers and created the ruse that she was a prostitute who faked her love. This episode, referenced only in passing, prompts Tyrion to remind his father that he had been married before when he was asked to get married for political reasons. Tyrion resists and asks him when he ever had to sacrifice anything for the good of the family other than himself, to which Tywin responds: ‘the day you were born’ (*Game of Thrones* S03E#05: 13:34) and confesses he wanted to murder him. This creates a dynamic that connects his self-addressed dialogue with the backstory in which Tyrion must fight for his father’s acceptance.

Thus far, we can appreciate the correspondence between the early or first direct addresses and the backstories of Richard III and Tyrion Lannister. It is important to note that when the story starts, both characters are the product of a backstory and have a concept of themselves shaped by those past experiences; hence, the first mention of what they think of themselves is because of a backstory. Hence, when the story begins, they both have a sense of rejection by others, especially their parents.

Figure 1. Mapping the connection between the first direct address and the continuing references to backstory in *Richard III* originated by the self- description of a ‘villain’.

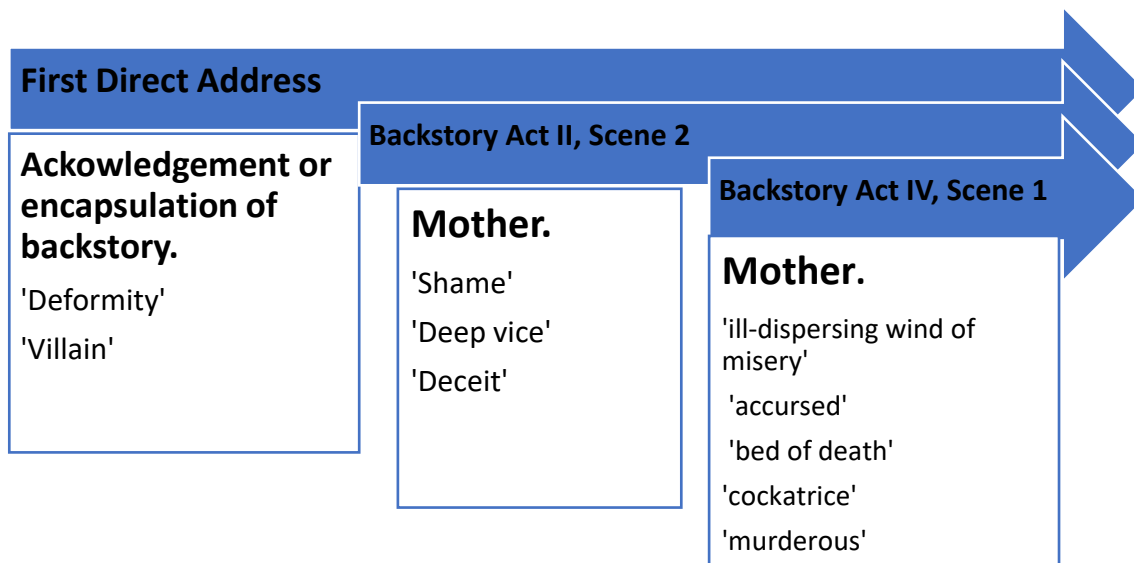
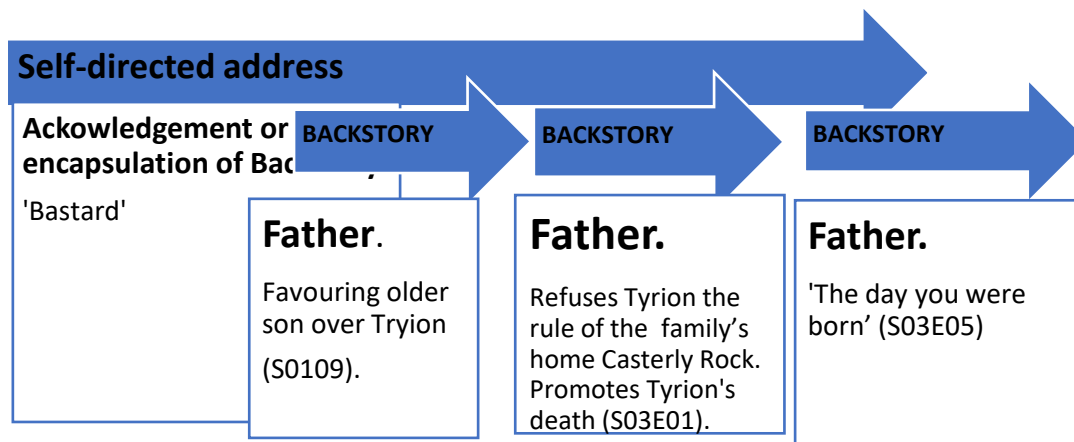


Figure 2. Mapping the connection between direct addresses and the continuing references to backstory in *Game of Thrones* originated by the self-description of a ‘bastard’.



Results

The background not only aligns with the initial self-descriptions provided for each character in the opening scenes but also reveals a strategic progression in character development that culminates later in the storyline. This marks a pivotal turning point in the protagonist's relationship with their parents, who consistently influence the main character's self-perception throughout the narrative.

For Richard, this climatic turning point is a reckoning moment in the relationship with his mother, the Duchess of York. She confronts him with the murder of the two princes, sons of Richard's brother and heirs to the throne. In this scene, Richard is confronted by his mother, who reiterates her disgust of having given birth to him, 'Tetchy and wayward was thy infancy, Thy schooldays frightful, desperate, wild, and furious' (4.4). She continues expressing her disappointment by uncovering how as a grown man, Richard has become 'subtle, sly and bloody' (4.4). The climax in this scene comes with the Duchess' curse, in which she displays the maximum amount of contempt, foreshadowing Richard's last scene in battle, 'Therefore take with thee my most grievous curse, which in the day of battle tire thee more than all the complete armor that thou wear'st' (4.4). This represents a turning point in Richard's character development which brings climax to the direct address-backstory dynamic that has been playing out since the first direct address of the play. (See Figure 1).

For Tyrion, the turning point happens in a final confrontation with his father, bringing closure to their relationship but also catapulting him forward into the story as a man liberated from family obligations that must prove himself, alone in the world. Tyrion's final confrontation with his father originates after several betrayals and a lack of interest on behalf of Tywin. Tyrion finds his father in the privy upon discovering that he had been having sex with the woman he loved. Tyrion points an arrowhead at Tywin while he disregards his son as usual. This time, however, Tyrion does not listen to his father and shoots him twice, after getting confirmation of his father's

latest disloyalty, and many more from the past, referring to the main topic of the legitimacy of Tyrion as his son. Tywin's last words as he kills his father are 'I am your son' (*Game of Thrones* S04E#10: 59:39). This seems to close the loop regarding Tyrion's troubled relationship with his father surrounding the rejection of Tyrion as a legitimate son. (See Figure 2).

For both Richard and Tyrion, there is a similar storyline that devises a clear character construction strategy based on the exposition of their psychological state in the direct address or dialogue. Using dramaturgical terms, it could be referred to as a '*psychological motivational arc*' that co-exists with the conventional 'character arc'. This construction is based on direct addresses that mention their backstory in what could be described as a *smaller character arc* within the major character arc. In other words, the climactic turning point that brings a conclusion to an emotional long-standing issue concerning the backstory is just part of the hero's main character arc. This design has maintained the plot in constant development, integrating the exposition of the direct address and the backstory into a full character creation strategy that approaches character creation as a nonlinear endeavor. (See Figure 3)

The 'motivational arc' could also be interpreted as what Batty calls an 'emotional journey', when combined with the 'physical journey' (Batty, 2014: 3) results in the theme of the story. It can be argued that the motivational arc coexists or becomes the emotional journey in a specific section of the physical journey. This helps us understand how the character development in a television series extends far beyond film structures. For both characters, the final confrontation with the culprit of their psychological motivational arc does not mean the end of the story nor completes their character arc. It simply culminates in the process of character creation, which combines different dramaturgical devices to highlight psychological motivation. For example, Tyrion's character arc development continues after his motivational arc ends when he kills his father, exploiting his particular theme until the end of the story. Tyrion's personal theme lasts throughout the whole series, superseding the motivational arc, but without shaking off completely his quest for recognition and the need to prove leadership and intelligence. In the case of Richard, the split between the motivational arc and the character arc is clearer and arguably more complex, due to the extensive crisis of identity Richard faces in the last part of the play, where he faces a 'psychological crisis' and doubts himself. After receiving the curse from his mother, he moves on to the last part of the play where he feels guilt for the first time and judges himself as a 'villain', but his 'arrogant-vindictive side tells him that he is not' (Paris, 1991: 50). Richard then regains his spirit and advances towards his demise, facing the expected result of a villain in the 'traditional morality' way (Paris, 1991: 49), ending with a climax full of ups and downs and the remarkable journey of the hero.

Figure 3. A direct address-backstory dynamic.

Frank's backstory and its relation to 'pain'

In contrast, the confirmation that Frank's mention of 'pain' in the first scene of the series as his 'worldview', avoids interpreting his future mentions of his backstory as a source of motivation. The detailed conception of 'pain' is divided into two types: the 'sort of pain that makes you strong or useless pain' (*House of Cards* #1, 0:54-01:21) in a scene where he strangles a dog hit in an accident. The series' screenwriter reiterates that this dialogue is part of a pragmatic worldview and describes the action as a 'mercy killing' (The Aspen Institute, 2015: 49:18). He explains further: 'This dog is suffering in a useless way. I don't have patience for useless things. What is the point of allowing this pain to continue? The dog is going to die anyway; I might as well end this useless aspect of its suffering now' (NPR, 2015). These statements do not allow us to interpret pain as emotional in the same way that the backstory and direct addresses work in the examples of Richard and Tyrion. However, I believe it is important to list a few scenes where utterances of 'pain' in Frank's backstory come across as a concept that suggests a troubled relationship with his father.

There is a mention of Frank's father in almost every scene of his backstory, each scene more intense than the previous one, reaching a turning point when Frank exposes in a letter a traumatic episode in chapter #26. The most direct reference to Frank's past in connection to a literal expression of 'pain' arguably comes from chapter #11, where Frank describes his childhood as a source of 'pain' (38:17-41:11). Frank uses his background to reminisce about his 'not particularly happy childhood', a condition he shares with fellow congressman Peter Russo. 'No person avoids pain' claims Frank.

Another example of Frank's backstory is seen again in chapter #12 when Frank meets energy mogul Raymund Tusk (19:28-20:17), who is vetting him for vice presidency of the country. Tusk's omniscient presence knows everything about Frank and his backstory, growing up with a peach farmer as a father. Tusk, however, does ask Frank about one gesture: the tapping of his ring on hard surfaces. Frank replies it was something his father taught him 'It's meant to harden your knuckles, so you don't break them if you get into a fight'. It can be understood then, that the purpose of showing Frank's father's advice about hardening his knuckles is an imprint that could point to a motivational behavior stemming from his childhood.

Frank's relationship with his father reaches a culmination point in chapter #26, where the use of dialogue is used to reveal, with a voice-over, a traumatic event from Frank's past. Frank confesses in a letter that when he was a teenager, he ran into his father when his father was trying to commit suicide. His father then asked him to shoot him. 'The next seven years were hell for my father but even more hell for my mother and me, he made all of us miserable, drinking, despair, violence. My biggest regret is not to have pulled that trigger' (25:43-26:01). Even if there is no literal mention of pain, the fact that Frank makes this letter an important confession arguably becomes one of the most significant backstory points in his life, a traumatic event in his childhood

that urges a revision, triggering a reading of pain that is less directed to a worldview and more connected with motivation.

Frank and his 'physical arc'

For Frank, as opposed to Richard and Tyrion, the lack of a clear turning point that delivers a final confrontation with his father, presents a character that seems to lack a psychological motivational arc. This is confirmed when Willimon clarifies the meaning of 'pain' in the first scene, which shows Frank murdering a dog with his own hands. Willimon insists that such 'pain' only means Frank's beliefs 'inaction leads to death and suffering (...) if I have to intimidate, to deceive (...) doesn't the end justify the means' (6:59, Gray Jones). Such a clear description of what the direct addresses mean seems to point to a character construction style aligned to the character 'wants', rather than the 'needs', speaking in screenwriting dramaturgical terms.

Consequently, it could be argued that the screenwriter's preference for creating a character fixated on a goal or a 'want' is because of the focus of the direct address to expose a 'worldview' rather than a motivation. The creation of a clear goal is a dramaturgical element that screenwriting theory recommends adding to the character's journey. The 'goal' or 'want' is a concept that screenwriters all over the world have integrated into their screenwriting toolkit (Jorgensen, 2023). Crafted by Frank Daniel, 'wants' and 'needs' are necessary to create a satisfactory character journey. Gulino explains further, describing the 'wants' as the character's conscious desire and the 'needs' as the unconscious desire (2013: 33). According to the paradigm, the hero must 'suffer' in pursuit of the 'want' and become conscious of what he needs, to let go of his want. In the case of Frank, the use of the direct address to show a pragmatic worldview seems to align with his 'want', which is to become the president. However, as Gulino explains, there must be a necessary interaction between the 'wants' and 'needs' for the character to change and provoke what is known as the 'character arc'. Parallely, it could be argued that the pragmatic use of the direct address in Frank's character prioritizes the 'physical journey' of the character (Batty, 2014: 3) and leaves aside the 'emotional one'. This is arguably due to the lack of connection between the direct asides and the backstory, failing to connect the concept of '*pain*', which apparently carries a lot of weight due to its constant mentions in Frank's backstory. The irony of these results is the admiration that Willimon professes for the use of the direct address in *Richard III*, which he describes as: '80% of the asides are actually expository, which surprised me because they feel so close to the bone emotionally' (Jones, 2013: 31:11). This results in a contradiction and questions the legitimacy of characterizing the direct address in the series as *Shakespearean*.

The ‘Show, don’t tell’ axiom

For Willimon, writing a television series opened an opportunity to experiment with the use of the direct aside where the ‘show don’t tell’ axiom was predominant. The ‘show don’t tell axiom’ (McKee, 2016) seems to be the guiding principle he subscribes to when writing the direct addresses for Frank. To ‘show’ is described by McKee as a ‘means to present a scene in an authentic setting, populated with believable characters (...) taking true-to-the-moment actions while speaking plausible dialogue (2016:24), as opposed to ‘tell’, which is described as ‘to force characters (...) talk instead and at length about their life story or their thoughts and feelings’. Willimon admits that Frank is allowed to have emotions but is better if he does not explain them in ‘real-time’ (Austin Film Festival, 2015: 9:24). He explains how he tried to deploy the direct aside in the same way as in Richard III, but it didn’t work. Willimon appreciates the direct asides in Richard III as evolving, as being expository at the start of the play, and becoming more ‘stream of consciousness’ addresses in the last part (Austin Film Festival, 2015: 9:25). Willimon is specific in pointing out the last type as the one he avoided. But this raises the question that if he had been granted enough room and freedom to create a character’s worldview, if he could have included some motivational ones in the mix of the asides he considered only ‘expositional’. The fact that the direct address was constantly calibrated but didn’t expose Frank’s backstory to create a journey according to its motivations is even more dissonant when compared with the showrunner’s admiration of Richard III’s direct addresses. Therefore, it could be suggested that the style of the direct address that ‘shows’ but does not ‘tell’ seems to be more of a restriction than an extra option for writing character.

Reticence at being called ‘evil’

The hyperfocus on Frank’s physical journey or his ‘want’ might impede showing Frank as other than a murderer and callous strategist. But when confronted with notions that describe Frank as a ‘caricature’ or ‘evil’ or ‘sociopath’, Willimon disagrees with the commenters (The Aspen Institute, 2014: 1:01:01) (The Aspen Institute, 2014: 22:00). Willimon emphasizes that despite the characters not showing emotions, they do have them. ‘It would be very easy to just have Frank and Claire sociopathic, characters who completely lack the ability to feel or act, feel empathy or compassion, though they don’t show those qualities a lot, they do have them’ (The Aspen Institute, 2014: 22:19). His purpose, he affirms, is to present Frank as capable of creating deep connections with others. As an example of Frank’s capability for human connection, he describes his high school reunion with old school mates where he gets drunk and ‘grapples with a time in his life where he felt such and appears sort of loved and has to turn his back on (...) who at moment could kill and then another must lament loss of friendship’ (1:02:48). However, the examples of human connections are few, with little consequence for his character development and unrelated to his backstory. The use of the direct aside with no connection to a psychological motivation magnifies the focus on the callous behavior of Frank despite the reticence of the screenwriter to seeing Frank as evil, provoking a defense of his dramaturgical strategy:

In terms of evilness I can't write characters if I think of them in terms of good or evil because then I'm laying judgments about them which might limit my exploration of who they are [...], no one thinks as themselves as evil. (24:05, Aspen Institute, 2012)

In Willimon's interviewer's defense, it's hard to set apart notions of an 'evil' character when adapting from a Shakespearean source such as Richard III. This does not have to do so much with the 'morality tradition' that ruled during the Elizabethan Era, but with the dramaturgical style based on archetypes that accompanied it. Willimon's characterization style, if superimposed upon Richard's, fits into the Elizabethan model of the 'Vice' (Keller, 2015). The Vice 'becomes a central figure, the main vehicle of comedy, an amoral, unscrupulous, witty deceiver, a mischievous trickster and manipulator, whose familiar address to them assumes the complicity of an audience' (Moseley, 2007: 39). The similarities grow further when Willimon describes that the play's dramaturgical conceptualization of character is about 'power' (Jones, 2013: 22:24) and its machinations in all spheres, not only in the arena of politics. The strategy to conceive of the core dramaturgical concept of the story as 'power' is so reiterated that I wonder if it would be possible to name the main character as 'Power' instead of Frank. Nonetheless, this adds to the similarity that the series shares with Richard III in terms of 'dramatic unity,' as referred to by Freytag (1908) which dictates that only the necessary elements the writer wants to illuminate should be kept. In Richard's case, 'bloody rigor and falseness' should be included, to keep the 'fundamental trait needed for this idea' (Freytag, 1908: 304).

In other words, Freytag contemplates that in the scenario of trying to dramatize the life of a king who wasn't always unscrupulous but was at times a 'blessing to England' with some redeeming qualities, such dispositions as 'moderation' and 'benevolence' should only be included if it fits the theme of the play. Such ideas preserve the poetic intentions of the writer to preserving the dramatic unity of the play and sustaining the idea of Richard as a 'villain', rather than relying on a moral judgment on the character. Based on this, Willimon's conservative attitude of not considering Frank as 'evil' could be perceived as a misunderstanding of the character's correspondence to the classic dramaturgy of the play. Moreover, it could be considered to contradict the original use of the direct aside to deflect the efforts to conceive of character as more than a concept.

Arguably, Willimon's efforts as a writer are to create a character that displays struggles like any other human being, rather than a concept. His reaction to an interviewer describing Frank as a 'caricature' is disappointment. He confesses to feeling saddened by this adjective when all he's trying to do is to portray loss and sacrifice (The Aspen Institute, 2015), which explains his disagreement with considering Frank simply as a 'villain' or as 'sociopathic'. It could be argued then that conceiving of Frank as a concept rather than as a struggling human being, is contrary to his authorial intentions. This could be because of a biased relation to Richard III, but it might also be because of Frank's actions and his relentless journey to reach a goal that outweighs the screenwriter's efforts to portray his emotional struggles. Such characterization makes Frank

identifiable within modern notions of dramaturgy focusing on a character's goal while neglecting other aspects of characterization.

Modern dramaturgical concepts like tridimensionality, psychological motivation, and the character's arc seem to challenge the notion that the direct address should only work as a device that helps the character achieve their goal. Yet, the screenwriter seems to accommodate the play's dramaturgical conceptualization of character when he defines the drama series as being about 'power' and the 'cost and with the great gravity to sacrifice everything in the pursuit of a goal' (The Aspen Institute, 2016: 1:02:48). Criticisms by the media seem to confirm the reception of the series characters differently than the screenwriter expected. Frank and his wife don't generate too much 'heat', transmitting to the spectator only 'emptiness' (McDermott 2014 :31) and the use of the break of the fourth wall, posing as a Shakespearean feature, does not earn them much recognition either. McDermott perseveres:

'It's strange, but as focused as the series is on treachery, villainy and other words that sound like they should be uttered by characters from Shakespeare, there is never much heat here. The icy cynicism of the Underwoods numbs everything, including the viewer's feelings'. (McDermott 2014 :31).

Similarly, Cochran (2013) believes that the break of the fourth wall is not enough to describe Frank as Shakespearean, as it lacks the necessary humor and frequency seen in the original series produced by the BBC (1990), propelling a lack of sympathy for the character. It is possible to argue that the use of direct address as a device does not perform in a vacuum and seems to serve classic views of character composition, which are hard to escape. Exposing the character's worldview without addressing their psychological motivations is not as innocuous as it seems to be. At first, it might seem to be ideal because of the effect the device has on the audience and because it helps to advance character and plot. But this only works so far, as demonstrated in the case of Richard, if psychological development coexists with the physical development of character. It seems necessary to adapt the devices that work in plays or films to a long feature format not only to create a character that functions dramatically under traditional norms but also to leap forward into experimentation with relatively modern dramaturgical concepts like character arc and to present psychological motivation.

The need for acceptance of backstory in television dialogue

The use of expositional dialogue to reveal the characters' psychology concerning their backstory might seem to be the next step in a reevaluation of dialogue use in television. It would arguably include embracing the classic use of *talking heads* on television, instead of denying it for the sake of a more cinematic narrative style. The conservative views of screenwriting advice consider telling the story with the most cinematic style possible 'Always pick stories that scream for visualization, talking heads are for the stage' (Lew 1993:22). Moreover, the description of the psychological state of the character is perceived as a remnant of an old televisual era. Lumet

explains how, at the beginning of his career it was customary to explain a character's 'psychological truth', delivering the motivation through dialogue (1995:37). He remembers this type of characterization as the 'rubber-ducky' school of drama, in that 'someone once took his rubber ducky away from him, and that's why he's a deranged killer' (37). But Creeber disputes that the differences in format between the limitations of a 'single text' are in opposition to a televisual format as an opportunity to develop complex character with the use of psychoanalysis.

In contrast, the television serial (with its long-form, episodic nature) arguably possessed a greater potential to represent the prolonged and enduring process of psychoanalysis complete with its development, regressions, and frequent psychological blockages. It could even be argued that the long-form drama is intrinsically better suited to explore and dramatize the complexity of character psychology as a whole, at least compared with the contemporary feature film that seemingly needs to pack psychological change and development into an ever-decreasing number and minutes. (Creeber, 2004: 6)

Therefore, an emphasis on a character's backstory does not seem to be as out of place on television as it is on film. 'There is something inherently reassuring in learning that hard-boiled criminals are sensitive pussycats beneath the surface. All that mayhem, extortion and cruelty probably just stem from not being loved enough as children' (Gabbard 2002: 09). In the main case analysis used in this article, the literal use of 'pain' is understood, as explained by screenwriter Willimon, as only being a byproduct of Frank's pragmatic views about life and pain. In this sense, a self-expositional character would be able to attach a label to himself that the audience could relate to in later allusions to his backstory. The fact that Frank is constantly surrounded and pulled down by his deprived upbringing should perhaps have included a direct utterance explaining his suffering and perhaps naming his personality disorder. The strategy for television has always been talking heads and when it comes to characters' backstories it seems that it is allowed or even necessary to justify a character's troubled current state in accordance with their past and that screenwriters could feel freer to be more expositional in terms of psychological turmoil.

Another way of creating character

Transgressing the film rule of not including backstory in the story's dialogue helps screenwriters to create character too. This coincides with recent views on character creation that step away from approaching character as a concept, triggering a conversation about how outdated screenwriting manuals seem to be in terms of character creation for television. (Greens, 2017) describes this approach towards developing a character, as being conceived of as a 'concept' from the beginning and following linearly from there. Greens reasons that the creation of character requires an exploration through dialogue that allows for interpreting characters as 'real people' rather than just conforming to archetypes of 'antagonist' or 'mentor' (49). Moreover, he insists that it is the use of dialogue as the guiding principle to create a screenplay that seriously divides screenwriting manuals from screenwriting practices and that could help the screenwriter feel more creative rather than just analytical (51). Using dialogue to purposefully reveal backstory might include more than just disobeying classic rules, but also contributing to the character creation process itself. The inclusion of backstory in the Tyrion Lannister case could be seen as a dramaturgical device that not only exposes character in the current action as someone who speaks eloquently but also

illuminates the psychological obstruction he could have with his father, which ultimately could help to catapult him into the future development of the plot, creating a dramaturgical strategy that creates character in both directions, towards the past and the future, helping with writing blockages and common character development problems.

Conclusion

By exploring the dramaturgical variances between NETFLIX'S *House of Cards* and Shakespeare's *Richard III*, this article has delved into the nuanced techniques employed in character revelation. Beau Willimon's strategic use of direct address in the drama series demonstrates favoring a pragmatic narrative style that prioritizes showing over explaining. The article has probed the evolving landscape of television dramaturgy, questioning the extent to which it should adhere to or diverge from conventional screenwriting advice, particularly in comparison with the cinematic style of filmmaking. Willimon's alignment with the 'Vice' archetype and the exploration of power dynamics parallels the Elizabethan era, suggesting a cyclical nature in dramaturgical concepts. The evolving role of expositional dialogue in revealing characters' psychology has been scrutinized, challenging established norms that prioritize cinematic storytelling over traditional televisual methods. The analysis posits that television's long-form nature affords a unique opportunity for in-depth psychoanalysis, thereby justifying a more expositional approach to character backstories.

As we conclude, it becomes evident that the landscape of storytelling is ever-changing. The interplay between television and film dramaturgy continues to evolve, with contemporary storytellers navigating the delicate balance between visual storytelling and psychological depth. The article encourages a reevaluation of the narrative conventions that have long shaped our understanding of character portrayal, opening the door to new possibilities and freedoms for screenwriters in the realm of television. In essence, this comparative analysis serves not only as a reflection on the specific case of *House of Cards* and *Richard III* but also as a broader contemplation of the intricate art of character revelation in the contemporary storytelling landscape. As storytellers embrace the evolving nature of their craft, they find themselves at the intersection of tradition and innovation, where the exploration of characters' inner worlds continues to captivate and challenge audiences in new and compelling ways.

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