

MARY SUE CHARACTERS IN SCREENWRITING

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***Abstract:** The purpose of the current article is to explain the meaning of the term Mary Sue character, as well as of its masculine counterparts, Marty Stu or Gary Stu character, and to emphasize the urgent need to avoid the use of such clichés in the construct of screenplays. The article takes into account: the definition of the two terms, i.e. Mary Sue, respectively Marty/ Gary Stu characters; the origins of the term Mary Sue character; the problems raised by the use of such characters; a brief review of Mary Sue/ Gary Sue characters in movies and TV series; analysis of several Mary Sue/ Gary Sue characters; methods to avoid writing Mary Sue characters, and conclusions meant to stress the importance of creating three-dimensional characters as opposed to Mary Sue characters.*

***Keywords:** Mary Sue character; Marty Stu/ Gary Sue character; Mary Sue cliché; Character's perfection; Idealization*

What is a Mary Sue character?

A Mary Sue is a character archetype that refers to a woman that has too-good-to-be-true characteristics and does not undergo an arc of transformation, reason for which not only does a Mary Sue feel counterfeit before the audience, but also the audience cannot root for her since they cannot identify themselves with her because of the unrealistic attributes she possesses – extreme beauty and intelligence, moral flawlessness, physical strength, and unprecedented skillfulness in various areas. The above-mentioned qualities that she owns makes every character overwhelmed by her beauty, cleverness, moral strength, courage, and skillfulness.

A Mary Sue character usually has a dramatic Back Story; she overcomes obstacles without effort, and proves to be rather passive in relation to other characters. This type of character sometimes possesses rare or unrealistic skills that deepen even more the counterfeit nature of this character, while her exotic beauty often implies having either a strange hair color, eye color, or even a cool, exotic name.

All in all, the Mary Sue character is depicted as an idealized, perfect young woman/ woman, which makes her nothing but a terrible cliché that should be avoided at all costs.

What is a Marty Stu/ Gary Stu character?

The male equivalent of such a too-good-to-be-true character is called a Marty Stu or Gary Stu character.

Mary Sue character origins

Paula Smith coined the term in a parody short story called *A Trekkie's Tale* from the '70s. Thus, the term originated from Star Trek fan fiction, and referred to a character that represented an idealized female character.

The problems with Mary Sue character

The Mary Sue character's perfection, as if drawn from children's stories and fairy tales, does nothing but bore the audience since flawlessness has never been true to life. Such a character is actually considered to be the author's idealized self-insertion, and it unfortunately stands for poor writing.

The best-written characters have flaws and weaknesses, and only after they have overcome their respective flaws, are they able to achieve their goals.

The main traits of a Mary Sue character:

- She is one-dimensional, thus one cannot distinguish this character from the rest. Moreover, the audience cannot realize who she actually is or what she really wants;
- She is extraordinarily talented at everything, and she rarely has to struggle with anything;
- She has no weaknesses or realistic flaws, therefore her actions imply no negative consequences;
- She is endowed with exceptional stereotypical beauty and attractiveness;
- She is admired/ loved by all the characters who are captured by her beauty, charm, wit, and courage;
- The conflict revolves around her and she is the one who resolves it;
- She usually has a dramatic tragic backstory.

A brief review of Mary Sue characters in movies and TV series

However, one should mention that the term 'Mary Sue' itself is somewhat flexible, i.e. it implies no strict rules regarding specific 'marks' that turn a character into a Mary Sue example. Thus, considering a character to fall into a Mary Sue pattern can be prone to subjectivity and some of the criticism may be unreasonable if weighted superficially.

Taking into account the above-mentioned factors, sometimes the problem whether specific characters are considered Mary Sue examples is debatable.

According to most critics, the following characters are typically bland, and they undoubtedly stand for distinct Mary Sue examples:

- Bella Swan (Kristen Stewart) from the *Twilight saga*,
- Anastasia Steele (Dakota Johnson) from *Fifty Shades of Grey*,
- James Bond from the *James Bond series*,
- Scott Pilgrim (Michael Cera) from *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*.

Unlike the above-mentioned characters, there is a second type of characters who do face struggles, which wouldn't make them part of a definite Mary Sue cliché, but since they are skilled at everything, they lack the force of three-dimensional characters; hence they seem to fall into the Mary Sue category:

- Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) from *The Hunger Games*,

- Harry Potter (Daniel Radcliffe) from the *Harry Potter franchise*,
- Jim (John Krasinski) from *The Office*.

Thirdly, there is another type of characters whose status as Mary Sue clichés is not clearly and unanimously established since only some critics agree they should be considered Mary Sue examples:

- Captain Marvel (Brie Larson) from the Marvel series,
- Rey (Daisy Ridley) from *Star Wars*,
- Arya Stark (Maisie Williams) from *Game of Thrones*.

Analysis of several Mary Sue/ Gary Sue characters. Reasons for which they fall into this category

- **Rey**, from *Star Wars Sequel Trilogy*

Rey is extremely skillful, proving more expert than the other characters, even in their own fields. Although Rey has never flown a ship, she manages to pilot the Millennium Falcon, and even to fix a problem with it that Han Solo himself just couldn't. Moreover, she summons the Skywalker lightsaber, whereas Luke Skywalker had to be trained across numerous movies in order to manage to do that.

- **Steve Rogers** from *Marvel Cinematic Universe Avengers*

Steve has no character flaws, being the most moral of the Avengers. In *Civil War*, despite the fact that he disagrees with the members of the group, he still succeeds in defeating Iron Man. He was able to hold back Thanos on his own, even though for a moment, whereas the titan had defeated the joined forces of Iron Man, Spider-Man, Doctor Strange, and the Guardians of the Galaxy.

- **Hermione Granger**, from *Harry Potter*

Although Hermione is new in the wizarding world, she appears to be so good at solving everything, so exceptionally intelligent that she actually feels one-dimensional. For examples, she immediately manages to use magic in order to defeat the Devil's Snare in *Sorcerer's Stone*. Moreover, in *Chamber of Secrets* she explains the "Mudblood" slur right away. One should also note that in the *Harry Potter book series*, a flaw in her morality, i.e. her vindictive trait, actually brought more depth to the character. Nevertheless, this flaw was erased from the movies.

- **Superman**, from *DC Extended Universe*

Because of Superman's overwhelming power, as well as of his lack of any significant flaws, the audience finds it difficult to identify with him, and sometimes even to root for him. However, this is a problem that appears with all super powered heroes. Superman's exaggerated, overwhelming power that makes him a Gary Sue character is demonstrated by the following: Superman was able to effortlessly beat down Steppenwolf whereas normally Steppenwolf could be defeated only by the joined forces of three old gods. Moreover, despite the fact that his foe was brutalizing the entire Justice League, which proved that the villain was successfully conceived as a credible threat, Superman managed to defeat him in just one minute of screen time.

- **John Wick**, from *John Wick Series*

Wick is rightfully accused of undisputed invincibility, which turns him into a Gary Sue character. He is the hitman ordained to win against every possible skilled assassin, and everyone, opponents included, knows it, before the fight even starts. Sometimes, though he suffers injuries, Wick keeps going against all the vicious

assassins. with no effort whatsoever. Unfortunately, because of his effortless, constant victories, the suspense of the movie is stifled from the start, and, thus, the audience's interest plummets.

Methods to avoid writing Mary Sue characters. Three-dimensional characters as opposites of Mary Sue characters, and ways to create such characters.

It is essential for a screenwriter to avoid, at all costs, writing Mary Sue characters. Instead, one must create *three-dimensional characters, i.e. true to life characters*. Therefore, the screenwriter must:

- ***Ascribe goals to characters***

The characters must have a definite goal and stick to it. Their goals should not change over the course of the story, as it sometimes happen with Mary Sue characters, or else the audience gets confused about it and loses their interest.

If the characters have no goal, or if their goal is unclear, there will be no conflict on the grounds on which the characters could grow, which actually means there will be no story for the audience to get involve in or care about.

- ***Make characters actively engage in achieving their goals and propel them into conflicts***

The characters must drive the plot, which means they must *actively engage in overcoming all the obstacles*, solving the conflicts, and achieving their goals. If they passively wait for the problems to simply vanish or miraculously resolve themselves in a typical Mary Sue manner, the story languishes, and the audience loses their interest once again.

In real life, people have good and bad traits, conflicting view, as well as moral and immoral goals that often clash in violent conflicts. Thus, the characters must be *propelled into conflicts*.

The conflicts with other characters can highlight what the protagonists stand for; they demonstrate their virtues as well as their weaknesses. Through these conflicts, the characters are shaped by the people around them. Moreover, the protagonists are forced to grow and turn their flaws into strengths if they want to achieve their goals.

By contrast to Mary Sue characters that rarely face any sort of conflicts, three-dimensional characters tenaciously strive to resolve the conflicts and achieve their goals, reason for which the audience can easily find them relatable and root for them.

- ***Endow characters with quirks, only if necessary***

A *quirk* is a unique or peculiar habit which generally manifests itself by: clumsiness, goofiness or awkwardness. Sometimes a quirk can serve as an effective way in helping the audience distinguish between characters.

It can also be used as comic relief, or as stress relief from the tension provoked by the progressively increasing obstacles that deter the characters from achieving their goals. But, just by adding some quirks to various characters is not enough.

- ***Create true to life characters by showing their flaws***

In order to build three-dimensional characters, screenwriters should *endow them with flaws* after the pattern of real-life people. This means that characters should reflect real-life people set in real-life interactions. In this sense, the characters shouldn't just be loved by everyone, by contrast to Mary Sue characters.

Therefore, the characters must have flaws so that they can be perceived as believable and relatable. Flaws are but mere obstacles to character growth. Creating intriguing characters with flaws allows the audience to identify with realistic characters whose journeys prove to be even more rewarding especially due to the great effort put by the flawed characters in overcoming their obstacles.

In the TV series *Ozark*, Wendy Byrde, the protagonist's wife, makes an excellent example of such a *flawed character*: a well-rounded character that actually pushes the story along and creates high stakes, thus keeping the audience on its toes. An unfaithful, selfish wife obsessed with having complete control over her family while still striving to protect it, a ruthless, lying diplomate motivated only by selfish concerns that put her family in danger, an intelligent but crazed ambitious woman driven only by her goals – money and power.

Still, it is exactly these flaws that represent the main driving force of the plot as well as the reason that keeps the audience alert and involved in the story, despite the fact that they rightfully make Wendy Byrde an undesirable character for the audience.

- ***Endow characters with strengths***

Indisputably, besides flaws, characters must also be endowed with strengths. They can possess some particular inborn set of skills, but they should also be able to learn new abilities so that they could grow throughout the story.

The screenwriters should put some limits, though, to the characters' strengths so as to create realistic characters and, thus, make them more relatable to the audiences.

- ***Create original Backstories***

Mary Sue characters usually have tragic Backstories. Nevertheless, traumatic past can function as a good Backstory unless screenwriters use such tragic stories only to elicit empathy from the audience. Hence, tragic Backstories can still be effectively employed as long as screen writers manage to turn clichés into tropes by weaving, for example, original elements into the Backstory, or by adding into the Backstory unpredictable twists that prove relevant to the actual storyline. The specific way in which a character emerged from a traumatic experience makes a real distinction from a justified, original Backstory and a fake, clichéd one, no matter if the character managed to turn her flaws into strength, or continued struggling with them.

A classic example of a tragic, clichéd Backstory assigned to a Mary Sue character is revealing her traumatic past as an Orphan only to justify her constant sadness or moodiness. A screenwriter must take into account all the different aspects of her life as an orphan, and show her traumatic past can also bring positive implications into the current storyline. Even the specific path the character takes to achieve her goal can be determined by her Backstory as an orphan.

- **Create dynamic women**

Jo March from *Little Women* stands out as a dynamic woman as opposed to a flat, unenergetic Mary Sue character. Despite the norms of society at the time, despite her unconventional outlook on the grounds of which she is considered rebellious, and despite her temper that is considered “volatile”, Jo constantly and actively follows her goal. Even though “the relationships with her family and close friend Laurie are put in jeopardy because of her goals and her personality¹” Jo has a distinct motivation that drives her throughout the entire story – she wants to be a writer.

Conclusions

To conclude with, in order to create three-dimensional characters and avoid the trap of clichéd Mary Sue characters, screenwriters must ascribe goals to their characters, they must build dynamic characters that actively and tenaciously involve themselves in overcoming any obstacles in order to achieve their goals, they must prevent characters from overcoming obstacles effortlessly, propel them into difficult conflicts, progressively increase the obstacles thrown in their way, and last but not least endow characters with realistic strengths, weaknesses and flaws.

As long as flat Mary Sue characters bring no tension to the screenplay and raise no interest in the audience, one should always remember that multifaceted, three-dimensional characters, as opposed to Mary Sue characters, is what makes the difference between well-written, genuine characters and poorly constructed characters, and ultimately between professional screenplays and poorly constructed, amateur screenplays.

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