

EPISODE 030

## 3 Ways to Develop your Song's Character by Looking at Internal Content Genres

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**[00:00:00]** Hey, this is Melanie Naumann, and Willkommen - welcome to the Stories in Songs Podcast.

Would you like to write a song that shows a meaningful transformation of your song's main character? Do you want to tell your audience about someone who had to change a part of who they are to get what they actually needed?

Does it interest you not only to write lyrics about external challenges but also to discover how those external challenges affect and change a person internally?

Are you fascinated by character arcs because you wanna see how a person has started out at one point in their life and what circumstances led to becoming a different person?

In today's bite-sized episode, we'll talk about three different areas that are at your disposal to show a meaningful change in how your song's character thinks, acts, or is perceived by others and themselves.

We'll do that by looking at internal content genres.

What that means?

Well, you're about to find out.

### TEASER



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## Stories are about change. But what kind?

**[00:01:01]** Before we dive into the internal world of a story's character, let's zoom out to the global picture.

As you know, stories are about change. But, more precisely, stories are about the shift of universal human values from the beginning of the story to its end.

And it's easy to say that, right?

In a love story, the two lovers end up together, or they won't.

In an action story: will the hero save the victim and overpower the villain?

In a crime story, the criminal is either caught or still roams free.

In a horror story, it's killing the monster before it kills you.

In a performance story, you either earn respect for your big performance, or you fail.

In all of those examples, something changes externally for those characters. So in one way, you can say they either win or lose. They either get what they want, or they don't.

If we look at those things from the perspective of "Winning or Losing", it's quite easy to figure out how the story changes. If they win or get what they want, their external situation changes for the better. If they fail or do not achieve what they pursue, they are worse off than at the story's start.

The key to writing how a character gets what they want and overcomes all the challenges thrown at them is through having to make sacrifices. And those sacrifices also concern letting go of what they think is right and updating the way they see the world.

While all stories are about change, it's pretty tricky to craft a believable character arc. That means a character changes from the beginning of the story to its end – either in their motives, beliefs, or their moral code. But that's something intangible.

How can you actually pull that off?



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Well, as we know, we need an internal change of the song's main character. That means if your character doesn't change in some way (either in fortune, thought, or character) over the course of the song's story ... well, they stay the same, and there's no internal shift.

This may seem obvious, but the number one thing to remember when creating a character for your song is that your audience loves it when the external challenges also affect who that character is and provoke a change inside of your song's character.

Remember that the external content genres concern outside forces aligned against the protagonist. This can be nature itself, another person, or society in general. These are represented by extra-personal and personal conflicts. They keep the protagonist from achieving what he consciously wants like saving a victim, marrying his friend, winning the final game of the season, whatever.

But what possibilities are there that affect a character's internal state?

Well, let's first take a look at what internal content genres are before we go through them.

Don't worry if you can't grab the whole concept of internal content genres just yet. We are going through each of those three internal content genres.

And once I explained to you each internal content genre I will also include story examples and song samples.

So you can see how that internal condoms genre. Is applied to writing lyrics.

## Internal Content Genre - Definition

**[00:05:04]** Let me start with a quote by Shawn Coyne, the creator of the Story Grid methodology, to define what internal content genres are:

*"The internal genres concern forces inside the individual aligned against the protagonist's pursuit of a subconscious object of desire. The subconscious object of desire is the ultimate need within a protagonist whereas the conscious object of desire is the want, his immediate, on-the-surface identifiable goal."*

So in a love song, the main character's external conscious object of desire / his want will be to win the love of someone special to him. But at a deeper level, he may need to sacrifice



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himself for her in order to redeem himself from a past moral failing. Or he may need to finally learn the truth of who he is and why he does the things he does.

In the redemption plot, the lead character is conscious of his wanting to commit himself to that other person and be in a relationship with them. Beneath that consciousness, though, if the lead character were to sit down with a friend or a therapist and be asked why it was so important for him to be in a relationship beyond “being with someone,” he’d eventually come to understand that his desire is a need to recover from a previous trauma/moral failing in his past. That buried-beneath-the surface need is the character’s internal object of desire. The redemption plot is just one of a number of possible internal content plot devices.

Shawn Coyne also says: *“Like choosing the global external content genre, choosing the internal content genre is crucial to your story. A poor combination of external and internal will result in an unsatisfying Story experience. A perfect combination will be a work of art.”*

## The three Internal Genres

**[00:07:44]** The Story Grid Internal Genres are adapted from the work of Norman Friedman, who was the first literary critic to make a distinction between internal and external genres.

Each of the main genre categories focuses on a particular element related to the protagonist.

1. **Morality** focuses on the protagonist’s behavior and choices driven by the moral compass and strength of will. This internal genre focuses on a person’s character.
2. **Worldview** focuses on the way the protagonist understands their world and circumstances. This is all about their thought.
3. **Status** focuses on the protagonist’s ability to deal with misfortune that is independent of their character or thought. Friedman called this area a character’s fortune.

These internal genre possibilities are not just labels and categories but are both the cause and effect of a protagonist’s inner change.

Now let’s look at the main differences between the three primary Internal Genres.

## Internal Genre: Status

**[00:08:53]** Status stories connote a change in the social position of the song’s or story’s main character. That means they are about moving from one level of social standing to a higher or lower one, depending on whether they succeed or fail in their attempt to rise.



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These stories are derived from the Esteem level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. They revolve around the universal human values of Success and Failure.

Status is the most external of the Internal Genres. That means the main character does not change his moral character or thought, but his external fortune and circumstances change, either because of or in spite of his internal nature.

If we look at a movie example, then Gladiator with Russel Crowe is an amazing status story. Just think about Maximus, played by Russel Crowe. He used to be the leader of a legion and then he falls in his social standing as he becomes a Gladiator. But what makes the story so great is that even though Maximus experiences misfortune, he's never selling out his values. He is true to his values, and that's exactly what helps him to win the love of the common people, and in the end, rise in his social standing – which is beautifully portrayed in the last scene of the movie as his dead body is lifted up in the air by the common people.

When you want to include a change of fortune in your song's character life, remember that it's important to distinguish between social class and social status. Class refers to the large divisions of society by economic hierarchy.

Status is the rank an individual has within a social hierarchy.

Status is anchored in self-respect. It's based on our behavior, determination, and self-esteem. It's variable, but it's also within our control.

A character in a song might try to get or maintain status in two ways.

1. The first way is through prestige. Prestige is earned when we and others recognize our skills or our value to the community. Prestige can be established by performance or by relationships. In Gladiator, Maximus gains the love of the people by going this way.
2. The second way to maintain or get status is through dominance. Dominance is demanded by appearing or behaving physically dominant over others or intimidating others with threats or bullying. In Gladiator, that's Commodus, the ruler, played by Joaquin Phoenix.

You can use status stories to give your audience a prescriptive or cautionary message.

- Status stories can be prescriptive tales, showing us how to advance or maintain our position in a social hierarchy. However, this is all about succeeding by staying true to your values.



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- Or they can be cautionary tales that tell us what choices and actions will result in a loss of status and failure, for example, by selling out.

So when it comes to developing your song's character, and you want to use the internal genre of status, then consider the following things:

- What's their rank in a social hierarchy at the beginning of the song?
- Will they attain a higher status or a lower status at the song's end?
- How did they try to get or maintain their status? Through dominance or prestige?
- Are they selling out their values, or are they holding on to them? Of course, that also refers to the character's character: Are they weak or strong?
- What incident threatens their status quo? What threatens their position?
- What's externally going on around them? What else do they have to deal with?
  - Do they love someone of higher or lower social standing?
  - Do they want to win the talent show to gain validation from others?
  - Do they challenge the ruling power because they want power themselves?

There are many possibilities.

If you want to look at some songs that have a built-in status story, here are some from Green Day:

- "Disappearing Boy" and "The Grouch" are cautionary tales
- "Stuck with me" and "King for a Day" are prescriptive tales

Or if you like Placebo, their song "Burger Queen" is a status story, but also a cautionary tale, as well as their song "Special Needs". Another status story song of theirs is "Bright Lights".

Let's quickly look at a song that uses a status story to create a three-dimensional character.

Here are the lyrics to the song "Stuck with me" by Green Day. Lyrics are under copyright by Warner Chappell Music, Inc, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC

Stuck With Me lyrics © Warner Chappell Music, Inc, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC

*I'm not part of your elite  
I'm just alright  
Class structure waving colors  
Bleeding from my throat  
Not subservient to you I'm just alright  
Down classed by the powers that be  
Give me loss of hope*



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*Cast out, buried in a hole  
Struck down, forcing me to fall  
Destroyed, giving up the fight  
Well, I know I'm not alright*

*What's my price and will you pay it if it's alright?  
Take it from my dignity  
Waste it until it's dead  
Throw me back into the gutter  
'Cause it's alright  
Find another pleasure fucker  
Drag them down to hell*

*Cast out, buried in a hole  
Struck down, forcing me to fall  
Destroyed, giving up the fight  
Well, I know I'm not alright*

In Green Day's song "Stuck with Me", we have a main character who is a cast-out. He is offered to sell out to be able to join the elite. So he faces the crisis: Shall he sell out or stay true to his values? He decides to stay true to his values. And so we get a bittersweet ending because he has shown his personal power, but still, he is doomed to exile.

Now even though we can talk a lot more about status stories, the purpose of this episode is to introduce you to the three different kinds of internal genres. So at a later point, we'll explore much more there is to know about status stories.

For now, let's move on to another internal genre: the worldview story.

## Internal Genre: Worldview

**[00:15:19]** These stories are derived from the Self-Actualization level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. They are about coming to a new level of understanding about something, in other words uncovering a new layer of truth. A worldview story is driven by the character's need for self-actualization. It's about fulfilling one's talents and potential, making sense of the world, and understanding your role in it.



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Unlike Status, the character's life experience changes how they think but may or may not change their external choices. The universal human values are Understanding and Lack of Understanding, which encompasses Belief, Sophistication, and Knowledge.

- If your story is positive, your song's message will go something like this: Sophistication, wisdom, and/or meaning prevail when we learn to express our gifts in a world that we accept as paradoxical and/or imperfect.
  - Basically, we grow up, stop seeing the world in only black-and-white terms, and start seeing it in all its shades of gray.
- If your story is negative, the song's message will be something like Ignorance, naiveté, or meaninglessness reign when we fail to mature past a black-and-white view of the world.
  - In other words, we don't grow up. We don't mature because we're stuck in the worldview conventionally belonging to a child or adolescent.

A shift in a character's worldview, which also refers to the way they see the world or themselves in it, is the most used internal genre for showing an internal change of the song's character. Most of all, many love songs use how a character changes their thoughts for better or worse. Because you gotta move beyond black and white views to be able to commit to somebody and start a serious relationship with them. You have to grow up to understand what love truly means.

So let's name some examples:

One of the most obvious and probably my most used example for a love song is "I'm A Believer" by The Monkees. We have a character who thinks that love is only true in fairy tales. And at the end of the song, and because he "saw her face", he has changed his thought for the better and is now a "believer" in love.

Or what about the song: "Grenade" by Bruno Mars.

This song is all about what the song's character would do for the one he loves. The most famous line is "I'd catch a grenade for you", but he comes to the understanding that she wouldn't do the same for him. That's a hard revelation, but it's the truth the song's character has finally figured out. So his blind belief in his love has changed into disillusionment.

Or let's look at the song "Hero of War" by Rise Against. We have talked about that song in [episode 27](#) as we talked about using progressive complications to develop your verses. If you haven't checked out that episode yet, I highly recommend you give it a listen.

Anyway, in the song "Hero of War", we have a naive main character at the beginning of the song who believes that becoming a soldier is a great way to see the world. At the end of the



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song, he has lost his trust in the flag of his country. He's disillusioned, but he has found new meaning by believing in the white flag. That's a great song to study how a character's worldview changes through experiencing external challenges that escalate more and more.

If you are looking for some more examples, check out these Green Day singles:

- "Walking Contradiction"
- "Jaded"
- "Good Riddance"
- "Redundant"
- "Nice Guys Finish Last"
- "Welcome to Paradise"
- "Basket Case"
- "She"
- "When I come around"
- ... just to name a few.
- Keep your ears out when you listen to songs. If the character in the song changes, mostly they have gone through some kind of worldview shift.

Lastly, let's look at the third internal content genre.

## Internal Genre: Morality

**[00:19:29]** Morality stories are derived from the Self-Transcendence level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. They are about testing the protagonist's inner moral compass, leading to a change in their level of character. This is demonstrated in both thought and action, whether for good or ill.

The universal human value at stake in Morality stories can be put on a spectrum between Selfishness and Altruism.

- If your song has a prescriptive takeaway, your song's message is positive. It might look like this: Good triumphs when the Protagonist sacrifices worldly, selfish values in favor of the needs of others.
- If your story is cautionary, your message is negative. It might look like this: Evil reigns when the Protagonist pursues selfish needs ahead of the needs of others.

One of the most famous morality stories is Charles Dickens' 1843 novella A Christmas Carol.



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Ebenezer Scrooge is the main character of that story. In the beginning, Scrooge is a cold-hearted miser who despises Christmas. The tale of his redemption by three spirits (the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present, and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come) has become a very popular tale.

Here's an extract of how Dickens describes Scrooge early in the story: "The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue, and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice."

Towards the end of the story, the three spirits show Scrooge the error of his ways, and he becomes a better, more generous man. He changes from a selfish man to someone who puts the needs of others ahead of his own.

That's a great redemption story.

Other great stories are, for example:

- The Hurt Locker,
- The Godfather
- Fatal Attraction
- True Grit
- or Gran Torino

If you're looking for morality stories in songs, you can check out:

- "With You I'm Nothing" by Placebo. In that song, the main character expresses inner darkness with an overt refusal of the Hero's Journey call to change.
- There's also the song "Meds" by Placebo. Here the main character faces an All Is Lost Moment but we never find out if they choose their inner moral code by putting someone else's needs ahead of self or if they choose the immoral path.
- "Because I Want You" is another song by Placebo which is all about a character facing a dilemma: Shall he let her go and let her find her happiness but be alone OR shall he make her stay with him to not be alone, but be responsible for making her suffer. Again, you can see the universal human value at stake: selfishness vs. what's best for someone else.

You can also check out the song: "Live Like You Were Dying" by Tim McGraw.

In it, the song's character hears someone else's story of how they almost died. And how that moment can change a person.

Here's an extract from the lyrics that shows how the character has changed.



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*"When it sank in  
That this might really be the real end  
How's it hit you  
When you get that kind of news?  
Man, what'd you do?"*

*And he said  
"I went skydiving  
I went Rocky Mountain climbing  
I went 2.7 seconds on a bull named Fumanchu  
And I loved deeper  
And I spoke sweeter  
**And I gave forgiveness I'd been denying"***

...

*Someday I hope you get the chance  
To live like you were dying*

...

*I was finally the husband  
That most of the time I wasn't  
And I became a friend, a friend would like to have  
And all of a sudden going fishin'  
Wasn't such an imposition  
And I went three times that year I lost my dad  
Well I finally read the Good Book, and I  
Took a good, long, hard look  
At what I'd do if I could do it all again*

...

*Someday I hope you get the chance  
To live like you were dying  
Like tomorrow was a gift  
And you've got eternity  
To think about  
What you'd do with it  
What could you do with it  
What did I do with it?  
What would I do with it?*



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You can clearly see how the character has changed from a person who didn't think much about others, and who's now forgiving, a great friend, a father who spends time with his kids ... he's now putting the needs of others ahead of his self.

A great takeaway of the song, right?

## Summary: Internal Content Genres

**[00:24:28]** Now we've already come to the end of today's episode.

I hope your head's not spinning right now. Just remember this: When you want to show how your song's character changes internally, you can choose from one of three options.

1. You can focus on your song's character's behavior and choices driven by their moral compass and strength of will. It's all about that person's character and the spectrum between selfishness and putting the needs of others ahead of self.
2. You can also show a change in the character's thoughts or the way they understand the world and circumstances. This is all about a character's thoughts. The values are on a spectrum between Understanding and Lack of Understanding, which encompasses their Belief, Sophistication, and Knowledge, and figuring out what's meaningful.
3. And lastly, you can also create a change in a character's fortune. Those stories are all about showing how a character is able to deal with misfortune that is independent of their character or thought. Will they succeed or fail?

Morality, Worldview, and Status – those are your three options when it comes to developing your song's character.

If you got any questions about internal content genres, feel free to write a comment or send me an email at [write@storiesinsongs.com](mailto:write@storiesinsongs.com).

I'll see you next time when we'll talk about what your character wants and what he actually needs and how those two things create conflict for your song's story. Knowing how character wants and needs affect each other is a great way to engage your listeners and write a song with a meaningful message.

If that's something you'd love to accomplish, I'll see you next time.



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Until then, bis bald und liebe Grüße, Melanie

## Show Notes

- “Stuck With Me” by Green Day – Stuck With Me lyrics © Warner Chappell Music, Inc, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC
- Live Like You Were Dying lyrics © Warner Chappell Music, Inc, Round Hill Music Big Loud Songs, BMG Rights Management
- Develop your Lyric's Verses by Using Progressive Complications – <https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-027/>



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