

PERSONAL HELL EXERCISE

In Greek mythology, Persephone, the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, was abducted by Hades and taken to the Underworld, the realm of the dead.

I was just reading this story and realized that all characters of change take a journey to the underworld. Characters must confront the very thing they would least like to, and confronting this thing is a kind of hell. More precisely, it is their own personal hell. But through this confrontation, they are transformed.

Let's look at the story of King Midas. If all the king wants is gold, then as a storyteller creating that story one would have to find a way to put Midas in Hell, to take him to the underworld. The storyteller granted the King his wish that everything Midas touched turned to gold. It wasn't long before King Midas realized that this blessing was a curse when he changed his beloved daughter into gold. Midas learns that some things are more precious than gold. A trip to one's personal hell changes one.

In the movie *Jaws*, a man is deathly afraid of the water, so where do you suppose his personal hell is? In the middle of the ocean where a vicious shark swims about, that's where.

"Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?" says Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, when he finds he must descend into a pit of the slithering reptiles. But we know why it

had to be snakes—it's because as we find out early on in the film, Indiana Jones hates snakes. To get the prize he seeks, he must take a trip to the Underworld, to his own personal hell.

In the classic film *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey wishes he had never been born. In his personal hell, he is granted the chance to see what the world would be like without him, and it's not a pretty place.

In Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*, a young woman wishes she had more excitement in her life. She gets more excitement when her favorite uncle comes to town and turns out to be a murderer.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy wants to runaway from home, so a twister takes her far away. And, of course, all she wants is to get back home, because she is in her personal hell.

In *Finding Nemo*, the father desperately tries to keep his son safe by never letting him out of his sight, and keeping him close to home. What happens? His son is taken away into the ocean. This is the father's personal hell.

“Of all the gin joints in all the world she had to walk into mine,” goes Bogart's famous line from the film *Casablanca*. He says this because the woman he was in love with, and

wants to forget, has just come into his world. This is his personal hell.

This is one of the simplest ways to apply invisible ink to your work, but it will yield powerful results. It is a simple way to find out what your story needs to be about. Find that thing that your character would rather die than do and make them do it.

Here is an exercise. Write down the personal hell for the characters provided below.

There is no right answer, just make sure the characters go to that place, or does that thing they would least like.

Example: A rich man wants nothing more than to acquire more money.

PERSONAL HELL: He finds himself penniless.

Example: A girl wants to runaway from home.

PERSONAL HELL: She gets her wish and wants nothing more than to get home.

Your turn:

CHARACTER: A vain woman cares about nothing but her looks.

PERSONAL HELL: _____

CHARACTER: A woman who hates people and wants to spend all of her time alone.

PERSONAL HELL: _____

Character: A man wants fame more than anything.

PERSONAL HELL: _____

CHARACTER: A man won't let go of the past and move on with his life.

PERSONAL HELL: _____

CHARACTER: A man has spent his life as an assassin.

PERSONAL HELL: _____

CHARACTER: A woman is so into cleanliness that she won't even let people into her home.

PERSONAL HELL: _____

CHARACTER: A man who is a lying womanizer.

PERSONAL HELL: _____

CHARACTER: A woman who dates only very wealthy men.

PERSONAL HELL: _____

CHARACTER: A man wants to spend his life traveling the world.

PERSONAL HELL: _____

CHARACTER: An honest cop.

PERSONAL HELL: _____

CHARACTER: An inventor believes his technology to be infallible.

PERSONAL HELL: _____

CHARACTER: A spoiled child.

PERSONAL HELL: _____