

Episode Title: Take Me to Your Writer | Part 3, The Weirdness Beneath Our Skin

Synopsis:

In this episode of Alchemy, Tim and LeeAnna take a deep dive into the physical characteristics of aliens—because let's face it, when it comes to crafting extraterrestrials, the body can be as weird and unsettling as the mind. From the bizarre somatotopic map to the unsettling concept of the flask-grown homunculus (thank you, Paracelsus), the episode explores the grotesque, the distorted, and the uncanny in alien design. The discussion spirals from mind-bending philosophy to deep-seated body horror, questioning what happens when we create life and where the line between human and monster blurs.

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Discussion Questions

Use these questions to spark conversation and reflection in the classroom:

- **The Uncanny Valley:** The episode delves into the uncanny valley, a phenomenon where humanoid figures that resemble humans but aren't quite right feel disturbing. How does this concept apply to the creation of alien characters? Why does the uncanny valley evoke such discomfort?
- **Paracelsus and the Homunculus:** Paracelsus' work on the homunculus explores the possibility of creating life through alchemical processes. How does the idea of creating a "miniature human" in a flask reflect our own fears of control, creation, and the potential horrors of scientific overreach? How can writers use this theme to explore ethical and existential questions in their characters?
- **Body Horror in Fiction:** The concept of body horror is explored through the distortion of human form in the homunculus and alien bodies. What makes body horror so effective in creating emotional unease? How can you use this technique to evoke fear or empathy in your readers?
- **Preformationism and Absurdity:** Preformationism, the belief that tiny versions of humans exist in sperm cells, is mentioned as part of the strange beliefs that shaped early science. How can the absurdity of such theories be used in fiction to create bizarre, comical, or even terrifying characters? How does the tension between the absurd and the rational fuel the creativity of writers?

Writer's Prompts

Creative exercises to help students apply the themes of the topic:

- **Prompt 1:** Create your own homunculus. A tiny human imbued with great powers. What powers?
- **Prompt 2:** Design a Grotesque Alien. Create an alien species whose physical form is both unsettling and fascinating. Think of the homunculus or the somatotopic map—what makes your alien’s body feel both human and not human? How do its physical characteristics reflect its alien mindset? Write a scene where humans encounter this alien for the first time, focusing on their visceral reaction to its form.
- **Prompt 3:** Our friend Paracelsus takes pity on a weary traveler, invites him in. The weary traveler asks, “Hey, what’s that brewing over there in that flask?” How does Paracelsus explain *that one*? So... make it comedic!
- **Prompt 4:** Think about something that we think we are so assured of in the world and give it a weird, maybe alien, maybe medieval explanation.
- **Prompt 5:** Alien Body Horror. In this prompt, you’re tasked with creating an alien whose body defies human expectations and creates discomfort. Consider the grotesque images of the homunculus, the warped features of body horror, or the unnatural movements of creatures in the uncanny valley. Write a scene where the alien's form shocks or horrifies the human characters. How does the alien's appearance affect their perception of it and influence their behavior?
- **Prompt 6:** A Cosmic Experiment Gone Wrong. Use the idea of creating life (in the spirit of Paracelsus) to inspire a story about a scientific experiment to create a new life form—an alien species. What happens when the experiment goes awry? Does the creation of life end up being a horrifying mistake? Is it something that grows beyond the scientists’ control? Write a scene in which the alien, created through science, breaks free of its creators' control.
- **Prompt 7:** The Homunculus in the Modern World. What if the concept of the homunculus, a tiny human created in a flask, was real and happening today? Write a short scene or a story where this alchemical creation becomes a real scientific breakthrough. How does society react? How does the homunculus itself react to its own creation? What kind of societal or philosophical questions arise?

Class Activities

These activities will help expand on the themes of the episode:

- **Group Discussion:** The Power of Alien Design. Divide the class into groups and assign each group a different alien characteristic (e.g., body horror, the uncanny valley, telepathy, size differences, etc.). Each group will discuss how their characteristic shapes the alien's role in a story and how it affects its interaction with humans. Have each group present their ideas to the class, highlighting how their alien concept can be used to drive narrative conflict and evoke reader emotions.
- **Alien Design Exercise:** Craft Your Alien's Body. Challenge each student to create an alien species using the parameters discussed in the episode: physical appearance, sensory

perception, and how its body reflects its worldview. Have them draw or describe the alien's appearance and explain how this design informs its interactions with humans. Then, each student should write a brief encounter between their alien and a human to illustrate the alien's impact on the story.

- **Debate:** Should Science Have Limits? Have the class debate the question: "Should science have limits on its experimentation with life, and if so, where should those limits be drawn?" One side argues for the ethical necessity of restricting scientific creation of life, while the other side argues that pushing the boundaries of science is essential for human progress. Use the homunculus, body horror, and the fear of uncontrollable creation to fuel the discussion.
- **Collaborative Alien Story-Building:** In small groups, have students collaboratively write a story about the first encounter with an alien species. Each student adds a part to the story, but the alien's appearance must evolve through the group's collective input. The alien's body should change throughout the story, reflecting its evolving understanding of humanity and its own identity. By the end, each group will have created a bizarre and unsettling alien species with a significant impact on the humans involved.

Closing note from the Podcasters, Tim & LeeAnna

And that's it for today, writers. We've taken you down the rabbit hole of horror, alchemical fantasies, and bizarre theories of life creation—because let's face it, the world is a weird place, and so are the stories we tell. But that's what makes creativity so exciting, right? The unexpected, the absurd, the chaotic—all of it fuels our imagination and makes us push boundaries.