

Episode Title: Memory & Self-Identity

Synopsis:

In this podcast episode, the Alchemy gang takes a deep dive into the fascinating (and often frustrating) ways memory shapes our self-identity. Tim, LeeAnna (and guest, Seth) explore the distortions of memory over time and how these imperfections influence how we see ourselves and others. With amusing tangents about LeeAnna's kangaroo hat and Homer Simpson's identity crisis, the episode highlights how unreliable memory is and how it affects both real people and fictional characters. Writers are encouraged to lean into the messiness of memory, making their characters' memories and self-perceptions as flawed and complicated as the human experience itself. It's all about embracing the chaos and letting characters' identities evolve through distorted recollections and shifting perspectives.

Warning: this podcast does talk about “dry drunks” – people who are staying sober while nonetheless having failed to conquer their addiction demons.

Discussion Questions

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

- What was the most surprising or unexpected topic discussed in this episode?
- How do you think our memories shape who we are? Can you think of a time when your own memory has misrepresented a past event?
- How can memory distortions affect a person's sense of self-identity? Have you experienced (or written) a character whose memory of past events shaped their identity in a misleading way?
- The podcast discusses how memory is often distorted over time. How can writers use this to make their characters more complex?
- The gang uses the example of Homer Simpson's distorted memory to discuss self-identity. What role does humor play in exploring serious themes like memory and identity?

Writer's Prompts

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

- **Prompt 1:** Your main character, whether by chance (or deliberately by a secondary character) is informed that their personality is seen entirely differently by the people around them, and not for the better. How does the other character make their case based on what incidents the main character has misremembered. Is this actually some kind of intervention that's going on?
- **Prompt 2:** Your character, in talking to another person, realizes they've remembered an event entirely incorrectly. Or are they being gaslit by that other person? Or perhaps that other person has remembered the situation incorrectly?

More general creative exercises:

- **Prompt 3:** Write a scene where a character has a distorted memory of a childhood event. How does this memory shape their actions and self-perception later in life?
- **Prompt 4:** Write about a character who misremembers a traumatic event from their past. How does this memory misfire affect their relationships or decision-making?
- **Prompt 5:** Write about a character who is convinced they remember a romantic moment perfectly, but as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that their memory of it is completely false. How does this shift their self-identity?
- **Prompt 6:** Imagine a person who clings to a warped version of their identity. Write about how their distorted memories color their view of themselves and others around them.

Class Activities

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

- **Group Discussion:** Split the class into groups and assign each group one of the key themes discussed in the episode (e.g., memory misfires, the Homer Simpson identity crisis). Each group will explore how this theme could shape a character's story arc and identity. Present findings to the class.
- **Memory Misfire Exercise:** Have students write a personal memory down, then swap it with a classmate's. The twist? The writer will read the memory but has to alter details, making the memory unreliable and skewed. This exercise helps students explore how memory can shape our identities and relationships with others.
- **Debate:** In small groups, have a debate on whether writers should avoid writing stereotypical characters who have clear, unchanging memories or if these characters can be interesting if done correctly. Encourage the use of memory as a way to complicate characters.
- **Collaborative Story-Building:** In small groups, have students start writing a short story in which each character misremembers a key event. After each section, the group should add a new memory distortion or shift in perspective. This will build a complex narrative and highlight the role memory plays in shaping identity.

Closing note from the Podcasters, Tim & LeeAnna

Creativity isn't a neat, tidy process—it's messy, chaotic, and unpredictable, just like memory and self-identity. Your characters don't need to have perfect memories or a clear sense of self. Embrace the unpredictability, the contradictions, and the gray areas. Life is full of "memory hiccups" that shape who we are, and the same goes for your characters. Let their memories—and the way they interpret those memories—create the complexity and depth that make them real. Embrace the chaos, have fun, and don't worry if things get a little fuzzy along the way. Take it from us, we have loads of memories and they're all completely wobbly.