

WHAT'S THE META

CHARACTERS

Part 1: A written part in a script.

Part 2: A written part in a script.

SETTING

A stage.

TIME

The present.

NOTE: Both parts can be performed by any age, race, gender/orientation, etc., and in any combination thereof.

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Two Parts on a stage in tableaux. After a moment, Part 1 emits a deep sigh. Part 2 turns and looks briefly at Part 1 before returning to his or her original pose. Soon after, Part 1 elicits another deep sigh.

PART 2: (Again, looking back at Part 1.) Is something wrong?

(Beat. Part 1 shrugs off the question dismissively.)

PART 2: I asked you a question.

PART 1: I know.

PART 2: Well? What's the matter?

PART 1: You wouldn't understand. Don't worry about it.

(Beat.)

PART 2: All right, first of all you have but the most rudimentary knowledge of who I am — me — so to assume that I wouldn't understand is presumptuous to say the least, and more than a little condescending. And secondly, I have to worry about it because I'm alone out here with you and a show's about to begin, so if there is a problem, I freely and openly admit to harboring a desire to see it resolved as quickly as possible. OK?

(Beat.)

PART 1: Whatever.

PART 2: (Enraged.) What? How dare you — dare you! — you, as thoughtfully transcribed literature, utter that mindless catchall phrase that is the embodiment of total, unmitigated verbal and mental atrophy.

PART 1: It's not my fault. (Beat.) I'm a victim of circumstance.

PART 2: What circumstance? What's your problem? Stop whinging and just out with it.

(Beat.)

PART 1: I'm . . . I don't have . . . I lack motivation.

(Beat.)

PART 2: That's it?

PART 1: Yes.

PART 2: So what's the big deal? I don't have it either. Most people don't. We just have to force ourselves. Force ourselves to go on.

PART 1: I can't. There's nothing there.

PART 2: I know it feels that way sometimes, but you just have to buck up and press on.

PART 1: Oh yes, it's all right for you, isn't it?

PART 2: What do you mean?

PART 1: Because you're . . . fleshed out.

PART 2: No I'm not.

PART 1: Compared to me you are. You're multidimensional. I'm just a cipher. A convenient device thrown in by the writer to expound upon a certain point of view.

PART 2: But you're relevant. You have relevancy. You're integral to the story.

PART 1: Only in a narrative sense. I don't really belong.

PART 2: Don't be so self-pitying.

PART 1: I'm not, I'm just being honest.

PART 2: Look, a major and completely unexpected plot point hinges upon your sudden appearance in the proceedings. Without you the play wouldn't be turned on its head at the end of act one, leaving the audience breathless and gasping in anticipation — on a good night, at least.

PART 1: That's very kind of you, and I know you mean well, but I'm not so underwritten as to be painfully aware of the fact that I'm just a tool. And I can accept that — I can. But not happily.

PART 2: I think you're being a bit hard on yourself, don't you?

PART 1: (Defensively.) I'm not being hard on myself. It was all I was given.

PART 2: Then make the most of it.

PART 1: Oh, right! Say's you. It's all right for you — it's all downhill for you. You get to reveal a multitude of levels and depths as you continue your ninety-minute journey from point A to point B. Your character's arc gradually draws the audience in and endears you to them in ways that initially they would never have dreamt possible, leaving them satisfied

and intrigued. Much to their astonishment, this person that they found themselves initially repulsed by turns out to be a complex and all too human representation of someone that they can empathize and identify with. As they walk out of the main door into the night air, they feel buoyed from a sense of having spent an evening and some hard-earned money in a rewarding and enlightening manner . . . with you.

PART 2: What's wrong with that?

PART 1: Nothing at all. But it wasn't my journey they were taking, it was yours. I was just a plot point.

PART 2: A vital one.

PART 1: In your story.

PART 2: In the story.

PART 1: In your story. I am a catalyst — nothing more. I have no depth. I have no *raison d'être*. I have no inner life. *(Beat.)* And I damned well want one and I don't care who knows it!

PART 2: I think you've already started to give yourself one, don't you, the way you're carrying on?

(Beat.)

PART 1: Perhaps. Perhaps it's a start. *(Beat.)* But I shouldn't have to fight for it, and that's my point.

PART 2: Why not? Anything in this life worth a damn is worth fighting for.

PART 1: Maybe so, but it's so much harder for me, don't you see, because I . . . I lack —

PART 2: *(Impatiently.)* Motivation — yes, yes, yes, I got that part.

PART 1: There's no need to be so testy. It's not my fault I was underwritten.

PART 2: No, but it's not mine either. I didn't ask to be written as a bigger part.

I didn't ask to be more absorbing and relevant to the current state of the human condition. You're behaving as if it were some sort of competition.

PART 1: Oh, "absorbing" are we now?

PART 2: *(Uncomfortably.)* Well . . . I'm speaking theoretically, of course. I mean . . . that's the writer's intention, it's nothing to do with me. I'm not saying that I'm personally absorbing, I'm just reflecting the viewpoint of —

PART 1: Is this preshow, by the way?

PART 2: What?

PART 2: This.

PART 1: This? No.

PART 1: Then what is it?

PART 2: It's, uh . . . it's pre-preshow.

(Beat.)

PART 1: What's that?

PART 2: It's sort of like . . . Off-Off-Broadway.

PART 1: Meaning?

PART 2: Well, it's not there, but it's not quite there either . . . so it's sort of almost not quite there.

PART 1: Where's there?

PART 2: Somewhere else.

PART 1: Sounds very ephemeral.

PART 2: Yes it is — and that's the beauty of it. And by the way, you're sounding more dimensional by the minute.

PART 1: Oh, thank you. Against type, I might add.

PART 2: Indeed.

PART 1: Come to think of it, I meant to ask you about that earlier — are we characters?

PART 2: *(Astonished.)* Us?

PART 1: Yes.

PART 2: No, no, no, of course not. I'm happy to see you become a little more well rounded but don't get overinflated at the same time.

PART 1: Then what are we?

PART 2: Words! We're just words. Well, not just words. Words are the most important part. But after all, we mustn't get too far ahead of ourselves — we still only exist on paper.

PART 1: Then why are we here?

PART 2: I'm not here.

PART 1: You're not?

PART 2: Of course not.

PART 1: Am I?

PART 2: No.

(Beat.)

PART 1: *(Dispirited.)* But I . . . I thought I was a character. Or at the very least . . . struggling to become one out of what little I am.

PART 2: No, no, no, there you go again — you have it all wrong.

PART 1: Then what am I?

PART 2: *(Implicitly.)* Ink on paper.

(Beat.)

PART 1: That's all?

PART 2: "That's all"? You ingrate! Don't you have the slightest conception of what that means? You are the conception, you fool! You are the birth.

Without you nothing happens. Without you there is no play. Without you there is no novel, no film, no poem, nor any of their bastard relations. You are the seed — the root of it all.

PART 1: (*Ingenuously.*) I don't feel like it.

PART 2: Not you in yourself, necessarily, but in what you represent. You are ink on paper. From quill to laser jet printer, you are and always will be the beginning. Others may mold you and shape you according to their will — for better or worse — but you will always be the font, in every sense of the word. It's what you are.

(*Pause.*)

PART 1: Gosh . . . I'd never thought about it like that. All of a sudden I . . . I don't feel so sketched out and plot-convenient. Thank you. Thank you very much.

PART 2: I'm glad. And don't thank me — they weren't my words.

(*Pause.*)

PART 1: So what's next?

PART 2: Preshow.

PART 1: And that is?

PART 2: When the others take over.

PART 1: Take over what?

PART 2: Us.

PART 1: Which, in strict definition, means?

PART 2: Strictly speaking I wouldn't like to say, but which includes — though is by no means limited to . . . makeup, gargling, vocal exercises, diarrhea, frantic last-minute line readings, focus, pace, sense memory recall, and stumbling around in the dark trying to find your spot, praying to God that you do before the lights come up and expose you as a co-conspirator in the enormous piece of artifice that you are attempting to lay before a potentially skeptical, though willingly complicit public.

(*Beat.*)

PART 1: Good heavens! (*Beat.*) I think I'll just sink back into the paper and relax for a while, if it's all the same to you.

PART 2: Trust me, I'm about to do the same thing.

(*Beat.*)

PART 1: (*Awkwardly.*) By the way . . . well . . . if you don't mind my asking . . . are you male or female?

PART 2: Didn't you read the play?

PART 1: (*Somewhat embarrassed.*) Yes, but . . . mostly my bits . . . skipped the rest. It was a quick read.

PART 2: (*Reprovingly.*) Then shame on you. As I told you before, big or small we are all part of a whole and our acknowledgment of that is the only way we can function properly — all working together. If you don't have the last little piece you'll never complete the puzzle.

PART 1: Sorry.

PART 2: Anyway, does it matter?

PART 1: What?

PART 2: My gender?

PART 1: Not to me.

PART 2: So why ask?

PART 1: Well . . . I was just wondering if you fancied going for a drink — with me.

PART 2: Now?

PART 1: Only if you want to. I'm not trying to . . . no strings . . . I just . . . well, I sort of like you . . . in a way, and . . . anyway . . .

PART 2: As a matter of fact, I would love to — I am, quite literally, dying for a drink. Let's leave them to do what they will — good, bad, or just plain incomprehensible.

PART 1: And perhaps afterwards I could show you a bit of my subtext I've been working on.

PART 2: Easy tiger, let's not get carried away. One step at a time.

PART 1: Sorry, I wasn't trying to . . . (*Gesturing.*) Anyway, after you.

PART 2: (*Gesturing.*) No, no, I insist — after you. (*Beat.*) Did you have some-where in mind?

PART 1: (*Begins exiting.*) No, do you?

PART 2: (*Begins exiting.*) No, but I know a nice place on 46th and First.

PART 1: (*Upon exiting.*) Sounds like a good place to start.

PART 2: (*Upon exiting.*) And end.

(*The light fades to black.*)

END OF PLAY