# CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT FROM SCRIPT TO SCREEN: AN EXAMINATION OF "LETTERS," A M*A*S*H SCRIPT BY DENNIS KOENIG

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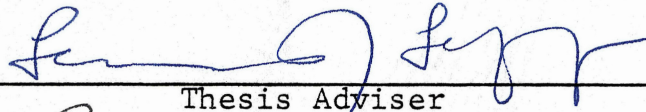

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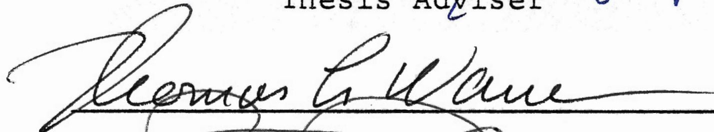

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# PREFACE

The critical study of television has grown over the years--the formulas used in television series, its influences on all audiences, and its aesthetic appeal. M*A*S*H is one television show that has been successful through its popular appeal to audiences. For ten seasons, this success has depended on the precedence of character development over plot. This study focuses on an examination of one script, from the 1980-81 season, "Letters" written by Dennis Koenig. This script shows how important character extension is for the success of the show. The analysis of the four drafts exhibits how Koenig characterizes, reestablishes, reaffirms, and alters four of the major characters: Hawkeye, Margaret, Charles, and Potter. The "Letters" script and actual presentation shows how these characters react to and deal with the situations in which they are placed.

I would like to express special gratitude to Dr. Leonard Leff for his enthusiasm for and insight into the growing, popular study of film. Through his knowledge in this field, he has created in me a more critical eye for the study, as well as a great amount of appreciation. When I began the study of M*A*S*H, I lacked

the focus I needed to begin; through Dr. Leff's patience and questioning, I was able to find that direction. I am most thankful for his constant encouragement and belief that I could complete anything in graduate school, most of all this study. I would also like to thank Dr. Peter Rollins and Dr. Thomas Warren for their interest in this study and their extensive comments that have helped me form an even clearer focus on the study.

I express appreciation to Miss Ranay Due and Miss Linda Duncan, who, though they were not here, had faith in my work. I want to thank Mrs. Cynthia McDonald for her extra work and overtime in preparing the final copy of my thesis.

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Last, I want to thank my family--Mother, Daddy, Beth, Michael and Rhonda, and Stephen, Theresa, and Heath--for their constant support and love. Without them, I would be lost. Thank you, too, Karen, for coming home. I love you all.

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# CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT FROM SCRIPT TO SCREEN:
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# A *M*A*S*H* SCRIPT BY
# DENNIS KOENIG

# CHAPTER I

The Phil Silvers Show (1955-59), Hogan's Heroes (1965-71), and Gomer Pyle, USMC (1964-70) have not enjoyed the extended popularity and success that the series M*A*S*H has received. For ten years, the audience's interest in M*A*S*H has not been limited to the prime-time presentation but has extended to re-runs: since September 1979, the show had been broadcast, in some areas, three times a day. In the series listed, the characters smile through their participation in military training or in the war effort. However, the characters in M*A*S*H are more often not happy about their participation in the Korean War. Based on the very popular Robert Altman film M*A*S*H (1970), the television series sustained the basic premise of the film, the absurdity and insanity of war, but the actual horror (the gruesome operating room sequences), the level of language (primarily the use of expletives and sexual jokes), and sexual explicitness (the dentist's concern about his homosexuality or the strong sexual overtones between doctors and nurses) had to be kept at a minimum to receive network approval. Even without these elements, the television series has continued to

to attract a wide viewing audience.

The popularity of the M*A*S*H series stems from the situations in which the characters are placed. The established formula for a situation comedy depends on the need to allow the situation to dominate character. Instead, M*A*S*H characters are placed in situations that reestablish, reinforce, or alter their respective characters. Although these characters face complications and confusion in certain predicaments, characterization and development take precedence over the typical action of a situation comedy. While the central focus remains constant--the characters' view of war's absurdity, the limited setting, and time period--the creators point out, in Making M*A*S*H, that M*A*S*H is a television series of high purpose that has never lost the sense of message over the seasons.[1] This high purpose has remained because viewer interest has been maintained through the week-to-week presentations. The interest requires no suspension of disbelief since the writers place the characters in highly credible situations and predicaments.

From the outset of the M*A*S*H series, the writers strove to establish strongly defined characters and to continue reestablishing these characters in the series' context. Through the process of character reestablishment, the writers emphasize qualities that have become readily identifiable to the audience; they further make the

character recognizable in what he says and does and in the way that he reacts to situations. In early episodes, Hawkeye and Trapper John engaged in antics similar to their predecessors in the film M*A*S*H; Henry Blake was virtually ineffectual as a commander; Frank Burns and Hotlips Houlihan fought for Army rules and regulations, even though they continued their adultery; and Radar O'Reilly practically ran the camp. Father Mulcahy and Max Klinger joined the series as regulars after their characters became established members of the M*A*S*H family.

As the show evolved over the seasons, characters became more than just one-dimensional television stars who exhibited the same reactions from week to week. The writers continued to expand characters through altering their reactions to different situations and predicaments; the characters also expand when they prove that they are not, for example, totally unemotional or strictly "hard-core" Army. The characters who remained one-dimensional, those who could not expand, left the show for various reasons.[2] These changes, however, did not occur immediately with the character merely disappearing from the cast. In dealing with these characters, the writers provided credible exits for the actors as they concluded their M*A*S*H tour. Henry Blake, in a very dramatic and controversial episode, was killed

in a plane crash on his way home; he was replaced by Colonel Sherman T. Potter, an old-time, more regimented commander than Henry ever hoped to be. Radar O'Reilly, who developed over the seasons and was even given a first name, Walter, was eventually sent home, and Klinger took his position as company clerk and stopped wearing women's clothes in order to secure a Section 8. Trapper John returned to the States and was replaced by B. J. Hunnicutt, a low-keyed character, but still mischievous. Frank Burns, who never fully recovered from the shock of Margaret's marriage, suffered a breakdown, was sent to Tokyo to recover, went home, and was replaced by Charles Emerson Winchester, III, a snobbish New England surgeon. After these changes, other characters expressed more insight than they had previously. Notable for this type of expansion is Margaret, who, rather than keep an inpenetrable wall around herself, has formed closer relationships with her fellow nurses and the doctors. Hawkeye, the only character who has remained predominantly static, provides the socially moral voice for many episodes and also retains the same sense of humor set forth in earlier shows. The characters, through these changes, have formed a tightly-knit group that resembles a family.

This family structure is highlighted and reestablished from week to week. The shows become a study of how one

character will react to a given situation and what the family members will do to help in a dilemma or a serious crisis. The episodes incorporate not merely verbal wit and slapstick but tensions drawn from the interaction of characters. Many times, characters, although they may consult one another about problems, must solve unanswered questions and serious conflicts by themselves. One script that exemplifies this type of situation is "Letters," from the 1980-81 season, written by Dennis Koenig. In this script, Koenig reestablishes, reaffirms--strengthens accepted qualities of a character--and alters characters throughout the script.

In "Letters," Koenig uses a realistic situation and emphasizes humanization through the characters' reactions. These qualities are exemplified in four characters in this episode: Hawkeye, Charles, Margaret, and Potter. These four are examples of how a writer expands, alters, reaffirms, and reestablishes characters. The "Letters" script shows how the characters function apart from the family unit. During a period when they have no incoming wounded, they receive letters from a fourth grade class in Hawkeye's hometown. The members, because of the rainy, miserable weather and their nasty dispositions, agree enthusiastically to answer the letters, all except Charles. Subsequently, five of the central crew--Father Mulcahy, Klinger, Margaret, B. J., and Potter--

have flashbacks throughout the script, while Hawkeye provides the skeletal structure for the show. Charles finally becomes involved, answers most of the letters facetiously, but briefly shows emotion when he reads a special one.

What is central to the "Letters" script is the way in which these four characters function alone. Further noteworthy, in the study of the four drafts of the script--first draft, first draft polish, second polish, and final--are the various, and in some cases, minute changes that occur from the first to final draft.[3] Through the four drafts, the action remains the same with variations in flashbacks and in resolutions to present conflicts. From script to screen, the characters enhance Koenig's written words through delivery and action. Hawkeye reaffirms his established, questioning character, while Charles alters and expands slightly, only momentarily. Margaret expands and reaffirms her character as she has developed over the seasons. Potter reestablishes himself as the unit's leader in his action. Remaining as the primary focus is the fact that these people function on their own when they require answers to questions, even though they need the strength that the other group members provide.

## CHAPTER II

Like the film *M*A*S*H*, *M*A*S*H* the television series depicts a group of people who are fighting to save lives and their sanity in the midst of war. The *M*A*S*H* creators assert that Altman provided the springboard of characters that have been developed and widely accepted over the seasons. As other television series reflect the time period in which they are produced, such as *Mary Tyler Moore* and *All in the Family* in which the viewer sees changes in trends, *M*A*S*H* is somewhat more limited by its setting and time, though several episodes are devoted to special holidays. The highlights of these shows, however, have been the characters' functioning in and around the setting and time.

Initially, the *M*A*S*H* series received mixed reviews when it first appeared: *Life* called the show "the best of the new" CBS sitcoms

> because it has Alan Alda, who's as good as and perhaps better than Donald Sutherland, who created the part of Hawkeye in the movie that inspired the series, and because it has writers armed with machine guns full of one-liners; the watcher is riddled with jokes.[4]

*Time*'s Gerald Clarke held a pessimistic outlook for the

success of the series based on the very popular film:

> This show, which began as one of the most promising series of the new season, is now one of the biggest disappointments. . . . M*A*S*H started out as television's first black comedy. It is now as bleached out as Hogan's Heroes.
>
> The creeping blandness was probably foreordained. Commercial television is simply not prepared to accept the savage satire of the movie original. Beyond that, no series could hope to recreate the film's popular tension between comedy and horror. The writers seem to have given up their initial efforts and now stand on their cliches.[5]

In his critical assessment, James Monaco calls the M*A*S*H series "one of the bright spots of the seventies, even if it is much more subdued than the movie."[6] M*A*S*H became and still is one of the more popular series produced for television, primarily because the writers, producers, and actors elicit unique qualities in the characters. The series, because it focuses on continued characterization rather than plot, cannot be categorized as a situation or domestic comedy.

The difference between what M*A*S*H presents its viewers and what a typical situation comedy shows is clearly distinguished in Horace Newcomb's paradigm of the situation comedy;

> Human beings create problems for themselves; human beings resolve those problems, even in nonhuman situations. It is the upturned line of comedy in its best form, and the result is a sigh of relief along with laughter.[7]

The events in a situation comedy manipulate the characters as they become aware of the complications and become heavily involved in the confusion. The characters perform only as the sequence of events demands and thus find a resolution to the confusion that has risen out of the situation. Because the situations take precedence, the characters become stock comedy types; therefore, their reactions become easily recognizable. These characters exhibit no expansion in development and remain static.

The domestic comedy, on the other hand, expands what has been established through the situation comedy formula because it

> is more expansive. There is less slapstick, less hysterical laughter. There is more warmth and a deeper sense of humanity. The cast built on the family is capable of reducing dependence on a single star, a single style. A richer variety of event, a consequent deepening of character, and a sense of seriousness enable the formula to build on the previous comic outline in significant ways.[8]

The domestic comedy centers around a family that consists of Mother, Father, and the children, as they contend with problems that occur around them. The course of events, most often, is determined by a dilemma that one of the children faces and is ultimately resolved by the strong father figure. The important focus is how the family unit joins forces to find the suitable resolution

to the complication; this complication brings the family closer to one another through understanding and patience. At times, the resolution rests with one character, after he has received counseling from Father, when he is offered options in making a decision.

Though it differs in some respects, M*A*S*H is an extension of the domestic comedy because the series focuses on the family unit that the central group forms. The central characters have become more complex than those characters seen in a situation or domestic comedy; this complexity has reinforced the idea of the family structure where characters are "forced into deep human relationships because they are serving in a field hospital, isolated from other groups."[9] The problems that the family unit faces are significant in the overall message of the series--the absurdity of participating in this war--and serve as social commentaries on the United States' participation. M*A*S*H has come to represent a combination of comedic and dramatic situations, not unlike a domestic comedy, yet the series does not offer clear resolutions to every dilemma that a character must face. The comedy stems from the ironic verbal wit, most often, though there are moments of slapstick and verbal repartee among the family members. The drama results from the complications, particularly those involving a moral dilemma of participating in the war,

that arise in the course of one episode.

M*A*S*H challenges the viewer because the writers present problems to which no solution may exist. The way that the characters react to the problems becomes the important focus of the show; the characters, in many instances, have revealed emotions through their reactions to the situation. Through these revealing moments, the characters show growth that is not seen in typical situation comedy characters. This growth, seen in each M*A*S*H family member, is similar to the development of a character in a novel. Gelbart's concern, at the outset of the series, was to extend the characters established by Altman in order to give them certain recognizable qualities. The characters could not be limited in these qualities, or they would become flat, static--unmoving in personal growth. If a character expresses himself through his dialogue and action, he is considered round. If a character is limited in what he says and does, he is flat. Extending these two characterizations are the definitions offered by E. M. Forster in his Aspects of the Novel:

> The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is flat pretending to be round. It has the incalculability of life about it--life within the pages of a book. And by using it sometimes alone, more often in combination with the other kind, the novelist achieves his task of acclimization and harmonizes

> the human race with the other aspects of his work.[10]

This distinction between character types is further divided into whether a character is static or dynamic: if he undergoes no changes throughout the course of events, he is static; if, in the course of the narrative, he faces certain conflicts, comes to terms with the conflict, and experiences a dramatic change, he is dynamic.

These types of characters have developed over the seasons in the M*A*S*H episodes. This characterization has not taken place in one episode, but the humanization process has evolved as the years have progressed. What has been established in these characters is human complexity, reflected in the characters' abilities to sometimes surprise and shock the audience. The humanizing qualities highlight the already established traits of each respective crew member. With the central cast of the M*A*S*H unit, the writers reveal gradually more insight into these characters. In the process of extending these characters, the writers strengthen their personal insights into them. The writers achieve a balance between verbal gags and the serious, black humorous tone that the show assumes. These people, in most cases, are thrown into a situation in which they have no belief. This situation leads characters, such as Hawkeye and B. J.,

to deliver lines of ironic wit concerning the war; this type of dialogue occurs, similarly, among Hawkeye, B. J., Margaret, Klinger, Father Mulcahy, Potter, and Charles. The writers strive for a balance between verbal comments and dramatic moments in order that the action in any episode will not fall into farce, or the slapstick humor basic to the situation comedy formula.

These characters continually convince audiences that they are human beings, susceptible to shortcomings and failure. Therefore, the writers are not limited by any means in developing well-rounded characters. Potter, who reveals an understanding for those who protest their involvement in the war, remains strictly a veteran military man, their leader. Margaret, like Potter, maintains that the Army deserves a great deal of respect, yet needs support from others, either among the family or her nurses. Klinger, who wishes he were at home in Toledo, assumes more responsibility as company clerk than he did as a night guard. Father Mulcahy, who appears mild mannered, can become angry, as the others do, either at his not receiving a well-deserved promotion or at the senseless maiming and death that occur around him daily. Charles, pedant and excellent surgeon, has moments of sentimentality and fear when he realizes that death surrounds him. B. J., firmly established as a loving husband and father, has been attracted to women in the

past, but always redeems himself. Hawkeye, virtually the most static character, is very verbal in his protestations about his place in the war and seeks justification. The qualities of these characters are stressed from week to week in season after season through their human responses to humorous and disturbing circumstances.

Dennis Koenig is one of the M*A*S*H staff who has written scripts for three seasons and produced episodes for one. He previously wrote for series such as Rhoda and Barney Miller and has been nominated by the Writers Guild of America for several of his scripts. Koenig believes, as do the other writers, that humanizing characters is very important to the series.[11] In a recent interview, Koenig discussed how important this humanization is to all the writers, especially since, after ten seasons, the writers have exhausted their resources for original stories, and how important this factor becomes to the series: "Human beings are complex. The show reflects this complexity. I think it [provides] insight into characters' lives. If they are expanded, they become more believable." Koenig believes strongly that the characters should not become stock, easily recognizable, but should be allowed to change. Very important to the writers is the fact that characters are reaffirmed from week to week. As a writer, Koenig

works closely with the cast and crew; he has formed his own conception of the characters, a concept closely related to the ongoing process of development. This ongoing process is demonstrated in the roundness or flatness of a character. The complexity of a character is revealed through his ability to deal with any situation. Like other writers on the M*A*S*H staff, Koenig has strong feelings for and insight into these characters. Without this concept, the characters would become flat and stale, "television stars" who are too easily recognizable and unchanging. The writers' belief in human complexity is a basic ingredient to the endurance of M*A*S*H.

Television writers face certain limitations, however, in what they can allow a character to do in one episode. The most binding limitation is the time allotted to the writers, what Koenig calls the thirty-minute format. The show is structured in two acts with a tag, the final segment of an episode: the first act introduces characters and the situation and includes the exposition and rising action, the second act continues with the action and usually ends on a climactic note or introduces the resolution, and the tag concludes the action either on a humorous note or with a serious tone. After acts I and II, the show stops for commercials leaving the writers approximately twenty-five minutes. Koenig

discussed the problems of the time limit:

> Being confined to the thirty-minute format is limiting. But with comedy, it is very difficult to make people laugh for an hour. Writing for a comedy is different from writing drama. The advantages of an hour format would be that [the writers] could delve deeper into the characters. We are continually cutting from the first draft and many times we have to cut "good stuff" because of the clock. This part becomes like a race. We have to make every line [in a script] count.

This time limit reflects the importance of what characters say and do, because as in the "Letters" drafts, obvious omissions in dialogue and condensation of lines occurred prior to the final draft and presentation. Working with this limitation, as Gelbart and Reynolds point out, the writers focus on people-oriented stories: individual character's motivation and style, and the characters' responses to particular situations and to each other. Koenig highlights this concern in his "Letters" script.

# CHAPTER III

The emphasis on humanizing characters is clearly depicted in Koenig's script "Letters." Unique to this episode was Koenig's initial conception for the story, based on an actual experience. A teacher in Arizona had her fourth grade students write about their favorite television show, and invariably, they all wrote about M*A*S*H. The teacher sent the letters to the staff; subsequently, Koenig was inspired to build an episode around the M*A*S*Hers' receiving letters from fourth grade students.

When Koenig wrote "Letters," he structured it in a flashback format, thus allowing viewers as well as himself a change of pace, because, as he points out, this episode "surprises" people--those used to the typical format--because it is different in the way that the material is presented and benefits the structure of the narrative. Though the use of flashbacks is not unusual in different series, it does provide a change from the basic linear narrative. To set the tone and the distinction between the past and present, Koenig uses rain to represent the present and clear, sunny days

for the past. The rain image accentuates the mood of the central crew because they have to deal with the dreariness it brings while it increases their boredom.

The "Letters" episode opens with the central members, except Klinger, sitting around the breakfast table as they complain about the food and the weather. Klinger enters the Mess Tent, very happy because the rain reminds him of Toledo, carrying the mail sack. After he gives B. J. a postcard that notifies him of a past-due dental check-up, Klinger gives Hawkeye a manila envelope full of letters. He discovers that, after writing Amy Clark, a teacher in Crabapple Cove, about their boredom, she has had her fourth graders write letters to the M*A*S*H members. Enthusiastic to do anything, the others eagerly agree to answer the letters, all except Charles. Hawkeye passes out the letters and stipulates that no one may exchange them with anyone else. They begin to read the letters and exchange some of the comments before Father Mulcahy reads one that asks if he has ever saved a life. He tries to give it to one of the doctors, but Hawkeye reminds him of the rules. Once Potter has reminded him that he did save a life, Father Mulcahy immediately begins his letter and flashback. He recalls when he saved an alcoholic--Irving, a dog, that frequented Rosies's bar for martinis. Following Father Mulcahy's sequence,

the action shifts to "The Swamp" where B. J. and Hawkeye are talking about their letters; Charles tries to ignore them. However, he becomes involved when B. J. reads him a letter from a boy who envies their being able to sleep in tents and to eat real Army food. He begins a letter to the boy, and B. J. shifts his attention to Hawkeye, who is dumbfounded by a letter from another little boy, Ronnie Hawkins. Ronnie tells about his brother who was wounded in action, operated on, sent back to his troop, and ultimately killed. He blames his brother's death on the reader--Hawkeye. Hawkeye questions B. J. about his function in the war and becomes emotionally distraught over the letter. B. J. offers consolation, but it does not help.

The focus changes to Klinger's office where he is trying to keep dry--holding an umbrella and opening filing cabinet drawers to catch the rain. In responding to an inquiry about Army pay, Klinger recalls when he tried to start his own chinchilla breeding farm--his path to riches. After Potter complains about their smell, Charles informs Klinger that his chinchillas are both male. Klinger, lightheartedly, tells the boy that he has found other ways to invest his money. Placed at the close of Act I is Margaret's flashback. After she reads a boy's letter in which he asks if she ever

makes friends with the patients, she remembers when she sat with a patient who was dying because he had an inoperable spinal injury. As she begins the answer, she is close to tears.

Act II opens with Charles' answering a letter very sarcastically, using his tape recorder. B. J. notices what he is doing, and Charles tells him that he will have Klinger type the letters for him. Hawkeye, still frustrated with Ronnie's letter, throws a wadded piece of paper away. B. J. again offers his help, but Hawkeye tells him to answer his own. B. J. turns to his letter from a boy who asks if becoming a doctor requires extensive training. He responds that the profession does require "a lot" of training, but he points out that every rule has an exception. He remembers when, because Charles was away, they requested an extra surgeon, only to be sent a lawyer. Hawkeye and B. J. decide to give Bainbridge, the lawyer, some "on-the-job training," so they allow him to cut sutures, much to Margaret's disgust. He proves that Jimmy can join the Army and be anything he wants. B. J. turns to Hawkeye to ask if he remembers "Bill Bainbridge, Doctor at Law," but Hawkeye is gone.

Hawkeye has gone to seek Father Mulcahy's help. He asks Father Mulcahy to answer his letter, but Father Mulcahy refuses because of the rule. He also

tells Hawkeye that this letter has caused a "crisis of conscience" and that Hawkeye must find an answer for himself as well as for Ronnie Hawkins. Following this sequence, the focus changes to Potter's tent where he is soaking his feet while answering a letter to a boy who has asked if the M*A*S*Hers ever become "antsy." Potter recalls when he was trying to exercise by shooting basketball free throws; however, he is interrupted in his fourteen throws when Klinger attracts a crowd who cheer for Potter and want him to beat the camp record of thirty-one straight free throws. But under pressure, Potter misses, and the M*A*S*Hers leave him alone. He advises Danny to try horseshoes, a sport where he does not have to be perfect.

From Potter's tent, the action returns to "The Swamp" where Hawkeye has returned and told B. J. of Father Mulcahy's advice. As Hawkeye lies down for sleep, B. J. turns his attention to Charles, who shrugs, and they return to their letters. Charles receives a letter from a little girl who has sent a birch leaf from Maine. He reflects, very briefly, on Autumn in New England; then, he begins a serious letter to the girl. Margaret and Dr. Breuer, who runs the missionary school, rush into the tent and inform the doctors that a little girl has suffered a head injury when she slipped in the mud. Hawkeye and B. J. quickly volunteer

their services. As they prepare to operate, after they have consulted over the X-rays, Dr. Breuer steps forward and prays, thankful that the doctors were available for surgery. B. J. and Hawkeye exchange glances and begin to operate. After surgery, Hawkeye sits with Kwan Li, still unconscious, and answers Ronnie's letter. He tells Ronnie not to hate, but to look for good wherever he can find it. B. J. enters, checks Kwan Li's pulse, and informs Hawkeye that the rain has stopped. Hawkeye rises and looks out the door, relieved of the gloom that the rain and the letter brought, closing Act II.

In the tag, B. J., Hawkeye, Charles, and Klinger are talking about the mail they have received. Hawkeye believes they have five hundred letters while only four hundred people live in Crabapple Cove. Klinger is upset because he had to carry them to "The Swamp." Their attention is diverted when they hear a loud cry. They exchange glances as Potter rushes in, exclaiming that he has made thirty-two straight free throws. The show ends in a freeze frame.[12]

The "Letters" episode reinforces what the audience knows about the characters; this reinforcement is seen clearly in Hawkeye, Charles, Margaret, and Potter through the way that they deal with their letters. Hawkeye unites the action because of his continuing ponderance about Ronnie's letter. Hawkeye is convincing

in this episode, because, although he finally answers the letter, he arrives at no definite resolution or justification for what he is doing. Charles, who rarely exhibits emotion, has a brief reflective moment when he finds the birch leaf, but he hides his emotion when B. J. asks him what he says. Similar to Charles in revealing emotion is Margaret, who cries when she remembers the dying soldier. They both deal with these situations alone. Potter, who feels lonely and humiliated when he cannot break the camp record for basketball free throws, finally breaks the record when he does not have pressure from the other camp members. The script allows these characters' qualities to be enhanced, those qualities that have been established and expanded over the seasons. Koenig humanizes the characters through the ways in which they deal with their respective letters and dilemmas alone. This characterization is further enhanced in the transition from script to screen.

# CHAPTER IV

Because the M*A*S*H characters have become firmly established, any slight alterations, any new insights into them allow the viewer to become more emotionally involved, whether laughing or crying. The engaging qualities of the central crew, those characteristics that continue to attract an audience, provide the writers with valuable sources for character extension. Having characters with diversified qualities--different outlooks and attitudes as seen in Colonel Sherman T. Potter, Captain Benjamin Franklin "Hawkeye" Pierce, Captain B. J. Hunnicutt, Major Charles Emerson Winchester, III, Major Margaret "Hotlips" Houlihan, Father Francis J. Mulcahy, and Corporal Max Klinger--the writers have salient characteristics to elicit in any episode.

What the "Letters" script exhibits is not only the characterization process but also a progression of changes that occur from the original draft to the final draft. The drafts display the necessary ongoing process and collaboration of the writers, producers, directors, and actors.[13] Though few changes occur in the different drafts, the condensation of action and lines is noteworthy

because it eliminates unnecessary antecedent action and repetition. Yet the prominent changes occur when the actors portray their characters in the film, after the different stages of the script have been altered. They bring to life the words that appear on the pages of the script. They enhance the written words as no other actors could because the viewer finds these actors identifiable with the characters they portray and because the viewer sees, through them, humanized characters.

At times, through the use of atypical storytelling devices, the show deviates from the standard story line, such as that seen in an episode written and directed by Alan Alda, "Dreams" in which the central cast has bizarre dreams because of severe fatigue, in "Point of View," in which the action that occurs is viewed through one soldier's eyes, or in "Interview" and "Our Finest Hour," in which a newscaster talks with the central members of the M*A*S*H unit. However, no matter what type of narrative structure is used for one episode, the characters have continued to take precedence. "Letters" is a typical representation of the M*A*S*H crew because it reinforces the respective members' characteristics though atypical through the use of flashbacks. This episode also exhibits humanization and through a balance of repartee, humor, and drama,

reinforces the pre-established characteristics acceptable to a wide viewing audience. The most salient characters in "Letters" who highlight this balance are Hawkeye, Margaret, Charles, and Potter.

Hawkeye has become an important focus of the series. Audiences identify with his character, as Koenig points out, because he is able to express what most people never can and because he has a set of values that everybody would like to have. Hawkeye has come to be accepted as the moral voice in particular episodes, even though the writers try to "keep him off his soap box" about the war. This idea is further endorsed in Roger L. Hofeldt's assessment of Hawkeye's character:

> Regarded by some to be the "hero" of M*A*S*H, "Hawkeye" Pierce takes over the counseling responsibilities. . . . His brash, confident manner is an inspiration to the unit, but he cannot adjust to the surroundings. He is a bitter idealist, and his customary cynicism around the camp betrays his frustration. Although he realizes war is a human creation, he cannot turn his back on humanity. . . This sense of duty and undying faith in the goodness of man is really Hawkeye's outstanding quality, making him one of television's chief spokesmen for American optimism.[14]

Functioning in this role has endeared Hawkeye Pierce to the viewing audiences. Hawkeye is important not only because he provides the moral voice but because of the way in which he expresses himself. He tolerates the position he has in the war, but he can become very

verbose in his satirical comments about his function in the war. Hawkeye has not undergone such radical changes as those of Margaret Houlihan, yet certain deep-seated conflicts have been revealed. He cannot cope with a woman's being a better surgeon than he in "Inga." He realizes that his attitude toward her has been ridiculous when it is time for her to leave camp. Hawkeye is accepted and understood whether he dresses in a gorilla costume and agrees to operate on Frank in "As You Were," tries to keep himself conscious after a jeep accident in "Hawkeye," or acts as commander for the camp in "Commander Pierce."

Hawkeye is a multi-faceted, complex character, who complies with no one's rules and searches for the answer to the role he plays in the Korean war. Justifying his participation in the healing process of the war proves to be a difficult task for Hawkeye. This attempt at justification is seen in "Letters" as Hawkeye struggles to answer his letter from Ronnie Hawkins. In Hawkeye's attempts to answer the letter, he ponders the boy's letter, questions himself, tries to rid himself of the letter, and finally realizes that he has the capacity and compassion to give an answer. His action is not unusual for the character that he has come to represent.

Hawkeye's dilemma provides the skeleton to the

episode because it functions around the other characters' flashbacks, though he is seen differently in each: B. J.'s, Colonel Potter's, and Margaret's. He unites these flashbacks because he creates the movement necessary for the script and film to progress. Throughout the different drafts of "Letters," Hawkeye maintains the same moral tone, his inability to answer Ronnie Hawkins' letter effectively. Receiving this letter is appropriate for Hawkeye because he wrote Amy Clark about the boredom and because he more openly discusses his problems than anyone else in the group.

When he reads his letter, he changes his attitude about the letter writing. Because of the letters he and B. J. had been reading earlier, most of them humorous, he was not expecting one so serious in tone. After B. J. asks him if the handwriting is bad, Hawkeye responds by reading the letter to him:

> No, its very clear. Listen
> (reads)
> Doctor, my brother was a soldier in Korea. He got hurt, but some doctors fixed him up so he could go back and fight. Then he got killed. Now I'll never see Jimmy again. You doctors just help people so they can die. I don't think I like you at all.
> (looks up)
> What do I say to this kid?

Little variation occurs in the first draft polish, except for two lines: "You doctors just make people

better so they can end up dead," and "We've all sent kids back to the line and had them end up dead." However, in the final draft, Hawkeye's last speech reads,

> This kid has struck nerve.
> We've all sent boys back to the line
> and had them end up dead.
> What can I say to him?

Previously, the directions had Hawkeye staring at the letter; in the final draft, though, he stares at B. J. Instinctively, B. J. offers his help in answering the letter, yet Hawkeye refuses, especially since he had set the rules.

Hawkeye's deliberation continues in Act II when he visits Father Mulcahy, hoping to rid himself of the difficult letter. Hawkeye hopes that Father Mulcahy can find some justification for their being in Korea. In the first three drafts of the script, the dialogue and action remain basically the same, with few revisions: Father Mulcahy is writing a letter when Hawkeye knocks on the door and enters. Hawkeye explains the entire situation to Father Mulcahy and asks that Father Mulcahy answer the letter for him. However, in the final draft, rather than repeating what the audience already knows, Hawkeye has entered the tent and explained what is bothering him, eliminating repetitious material. This scene would prove to be time consuming because of

unnecessary material; therefore, the condensation of time, the "working against the clock" as Koenig asserts, which is very important in the format, is exhibited here as well. In this draft, the scene opens with Mulcahy's stating, "So this letter has triggered a crisis of conscience for you." Hawkeye's attempt to have Mulcahy answer the letter is thwarted because of his own rule and because of what Mulcahy says to him:

> . . . This letter has stirred up some deep feelings in you, Hawkeye, and you're going to have to deal with those feelings whether you answer the letter or not. If seems to me the problem isn't just what to tell him, but also what to tell yourself. Perhaps you can find the answer that will satisfy both of you. Can you see that, Hawkeye?

This scene shows Father Mulcahy's dealing firmly with a member of the established family. He cannot be expected to solve all the problems arising in camp just as he cannot be expected to control his temper constantly. Yet he is not harsh toward Hawkeye; he is kind and compassionate. He wants Hawkeye to think for himself, not to depend on someone else for the proper answer to Ronnie's letter. Father Mulcahy provides that strong moral sense of duty which offsets Hawkeye's questioning the war. He supplies support when it is needed in or out of the operating room, but he does not make value judgments about what the others do

in camp. Hawkeye turns to him when he has been "praying" that Father Mulcahy can help him. Hawkeye expects Father Mulcahy to provide all the answers because he represents religion, but Father Mulcahy cannot function as a spiritual guide at all times.

To offset the weightiness of the previous dialogue, the scene concludes on a light note when Mulcahy says,

> Listen, you're not the only one
> who has sensitive letters to respond
> to
> (picks up letter, reads)
> 'Dear MASH people, I'm writing
> this only because teacher's making
> me. Personally, I'd rather be
> playing dodge ball 'cause this is
> really boring. Your friend, Mary
> Collins.'

In direction, it reads, "Deadpan, Mulcahy looks at Hawkeye who can't help but smile." To Mulcahy's sensitive letter, Hawkeye replies, "Thanks, Father, I needed that."

Later in Act II, Hawkeye relates his failure to "pawn off" his letter on Father Mulcahy. When Hawkeye feels that he can accomplish no more with the letter, he states, "I'm gonna try to sleep. And fail." In the first three drafts, B. J. responds to Hawkeye's comment, in reference to Father Mulcahy's not taking the letter, ". . . in essence, physician heal thyself," "What's to heal? Hawk, you've done nothing wrong." Hawkeye remarks, "I wish I could be that sure." In these drafts, with slight variations, the dialogue continues,

B. J.
What's with all this guilt?
Ronnie Hawkins might not appreciate
it, but you _save_ lives, remember?

Hawkeye
But, I'm also in weapons repair.
I fix people up to be killed or
to kill others. I can't deny
that. And I can't live with it,
either. What the hell am I doing
here?

B. J.
What the hell are any of us doing
here?

Hawkeye
What good has it done? I mean,
really what good has it done?
(sighs)
I'm gonna try to sleep. And fail.[15]

However, in the final draft, these lines are condensed. Through these lines, B. J., who is normally not as verbose as Hawkeye, echoes what Hawkeye is trying to justify, and, in essence, what Father Mulcahy has already tried to tell him. Since Hawkeye has been reminded of this crisis of conscience, B. J.'s assessment of the situation is eliminated.

After the sequence in which Margaret and Dr. Breuer rush in to tell the doctors about Kwan Li, very few variations occur throughout the draft. The changes take place when the characters are seen in the operating room, viewing the x-rays, before they prepare to operate on Kwan Li.[16] In the second polish, Dr. Breuer asks the doctors to wait in order that he might pray over

the child before they begin the operation:

> Breuer
> Dear God. I thank you for providing these skilled surgeons. To have them here, in this place at this time is truly a sign of your providence. Please bless their work.

The prayer remains the same in the final draft, yet Dr. Breuer does not ask permission to pray for Kwan Li and the doctors. In the directions, once he has prayed, he steps away from the operating table, and Hawkeye and B. J. exchange a look, then continue to work. This action highlights the dialogue exchanges that have taken place prior to their operating on Kwan Li.

After this scene, the action moves to post-op where "Hawkeye is seated next to the unconscious Kwan Li. He's writing a letter." In voice-over narration, Hawkeye answers the difficult letter from Ronnie Hawkins:

> . . . .Ronnie, it'd be a shame to let the love you had for your brother turn into hate for others. Hate makes war, and war is what killed him. I understand your feelings. I often hate myself for what I'm doing here. It fills me with anger and a sense of futility. But sometimes in the midst of all this insanity, the smallest event can make my being here seem worthwhile. I'm sorry Ronnie, but maybe that's the best answer I have to offer you, that you look for good wherever you can find it.[17]

He omits the fact, in the last draft, that he has saved Kwan Li's life, but gives essentially the same answer to the boy. Again, the dialogue is long, yet needed, for Hawkeye must express in words his function in the war. This action is followed by Hawkeye's touching Kwan Li's forehead as B. J. approaches the bed and comments, "Hey whatta you know. A break in the gloom." This comment also signals an end to his dilemma.

Koenig provides the dilemma that has become typical to Hawkeye's character, justifying his participation in the war. Now, he is trying to answer to a youngster who probably does not understand the full tragedy of war, only the cruelty of losing his brother. Koenig points out that Hawkeye does receive the most important letter in comparison to the others. This dilemma provides the narrative thread necessary to unite the other flashbacks. This experience is highlighted when it is seen in the actual film of the episode.

In the presentation, the action and dialogue move quickly and are fully embellished by Alan Alda's "Hawkeye." The way in which he reads the letter to B.J., slouching over on his cot and looking up finally with questioning eyes, sets the tone for the sequence. Because of his voice inflection, the character seems desperate, agonized, clearly distraught. He carries with him the same effect when he is seen in Father Mulcahy's tent. Hawkeye's

demeanor never changes in this sequence; he continues to be despondent, though Mulcahy exhibits lightheartedness even in his serious speech to Hawkeye. The dialogue changes, in this sequence, are minute in the film. Only various words are rearranged, some added; however, these lines are influenced by the way they are delivered. Furthermore, the action accentuates Hawkeye's "crisis of conscience;" he stands throughout the scene, pacing, moving tensely. Primarily, the camera remains in a medium shot, cutting from Father Mulcahy to Hawkeye, though several times Hawkeye is shown in close-up in order to show his reactions to Father Mulcahy's denying his request.

This action is seen once again in the sequence in which Hawkeye, B. J., and Margaret prepare to operate on Kwan Li. When Dr. Breuer says his prayer, the camera closes in for reaction shots and cuts rapidly from Hawkeye's looking at B. J. and Margaret, returning quickly to Hawkeye as he begins the delicate operation. Important in this scene is the placement of characters around the operating table: Hawkeye and B. J. are crouched in the foreground with Margaret standing in the middle. Dr. Breuer stands in the background, in the center, presiding over the operation as if he is a guardian angel who supplies moral support for the doctors. The placement also accentuates the tenseness

in their trying to save Kwan Li's life and the closeness of these people because of team work.

Although Hawkeye realizes the importance of his function in the Korean War after he saves Kwan Li's life, he expresses the same attitude as that seen earlier in the film. Shown in close-up at the end of Act II, Hawkeye struggles to express to Ronnie Hawkins the emotional effect, the impact, of saving Kwan Li's life. The camera moves from Hawkeye to reveal that he is sitting, almost crouching, very closely to Kwan Li's bed. And while he writes the letter, he pauses momentarily to place his hand on the girl's face, as if he is praying that she will survive so that his work will not have been done in vain. The camera then tilts up to include B. J. as he approaches the bed. This continuity captures the doctors' care for this little girl, though she is not American. After B. J. takes Kwan Li's pulse and reassures Hawkeye that she will be fine, he asks about Hawkeye's emotional state ("How 'bout you?"--Hawkeye, "Better."), and tells Hawkeye that the rain has stopped. In the script, "Hawkeye rises, walks slowly to the door of post-op, stares out, gently pushing on the door, and states flatly, "Well, look at that. A break in the gloom." The action alters, differing from what is stated in the final draft direct-ions: "Hawkeye yawns, stretches and smiles a little.

He motions to a nurse to attend Kwan Li as he and B. J. slowly depart." Instead, Hawkeye leaves alone, as he has dealt with the dilemma--alone.

Hawkeye, in this episode, receives more reaffirmation than extension because he does have to answer the most difficult letter and because this character has not lost any credibility over the seasons. The audience believes in Hawkeye's concern about the letter and his struggle to justify his position to Ronnie Hawkins, who remains unseen and is critical of Hawkeye's role in the war. Though Hawkeye does eventually answer the letter, he does not seem quite satisfied with his justification to Ronnie. He was able to save Kwan Li's life, a casualty of the weather, not the war. Saving Kwan Li's life proves to be an easier answer, especially after Dr. Breuer's prayer, than if he had been confronted with incoming wounded. As a consequence, he would have operated on the soldiers and either sent them home or back to their troops. Thus, Hawkeye is left with an ambiguous resolution because he has not clearly answered the question for himself. The focus on Hawkeye's dilemma reaffirms his status as the verbal moral voice for the crew.

Unlike Hawkeye who protests the war is Major Margaret "Hotlips" Houlihan who knows why she is in Korea and what she has to do for the Army. Also, where

Hawkeye has remained static, Margaret has become a dynamic character, developing and receiving extension in characterization over the past few seasons. In earlier episodes, Margaret is seen as a regular Army nurse who never deviates from the rules, always adamant about them even though she continues an affair with a married man, Frank Burns. Over the seasons, Margaret has grown into a more well-defined, distinctive character. Koenig says that Margaret's role "has changed a lot," yet she "still keeps things inside her, is still more regimented to regulation army and is an internalized character. There's no fooling around. She doesn't show much emotion, but [in the "Letters" episode], she is emotionally affected by what is occurring around her." Margaret, because of her growth, has become representative of the strength most women wish to have:

> Major Margaret Houlihan is a natural representative for the American woman. Her struggle to balance haughty assertiveness with an unwillingness to sacrifice her feminity is a common crisis of decision facing modern women.[18]

Margaret exhibits that needed quality that is common to contemporary women; she has had an affair with a married man, has broken that relationship to marry another man, has faced her in-law's scorn for her social status, has experienced a divorce, and, in the process, has grown

tremendously.

In "Letters," this regulation officer reveals a tender side, a nurturing side to her character. However, in a brief appearance in B. J.'s flashback, she reaffirms the "spit-and-polish, by-the-book, iron-spined warhorse of a major, a martinent to her nurses, and a spoilsport, petty fink, and tattletale to the staff" when she objects to Hawkeye's and B. J.'s allowing the lawyer to aid during surgery.[19] This character, this strong woman, Margaret, has evolved into a loving, caring woman who continues to fight for Army standards; she reveals her emotions only at the most appropriate times for herself: when she is alone.

Placed at the end of Act I is Margaret's flashback. Throughout the progressive drafts of the script, her reminiscence alters very slightly. In the first draft, Margaret, as specified in directions, is placing a towel under her door to keep out the heavy downpour; she then begins to read her letter. The latter three scripts have her reading the letter with a young boy's voice-over narration. As she reads the letter, she discontinues her towelling and ponders what the boy has written:

Young Boy
(voice over)
'Dear Masher, I just had my
tonsils out which wasn't too
bad because I got to eat a lot

> of ice cream. Anyway, I became good friends with the doctors and nurses. Do you ever make friends with the patients there?'

Immediately, the scene cuts to the interior of pre-op, where Margaret is talking to a young soldier, lying on a table. As they talk, she holds his hand. He is telling her about his dream to become a farmer. They are interrupted when another nurse, at first, approaches to relieve Margaret; in the later drafts, the nurse informs her that Dr. Pierce wants to speak to her. Hawkeye and B. J. inform her that the boy's "liver is gone" and B. J. states, "I never thought we'd be grateful for a severed spinal cord." She has told the young soldier that he has no movement because of some medication he has been given. B. J. and Hawkeye want Margaret to take some time for rest; however, she refuses and returns to the young man, when he continues to tell her about his girl at home. Margaret remains calm, knowing the inevitability of the situation. As the soldier begins to tell her about his marriage plans, the directions specify that the camera move in slowly, in order to reveal Margaret's emotional state while she tries to maintain her facade. The script scene shifts back to Margaret's tent, with a close-up of Margaret's pad and pencil. In the actual directions, the camera is to slowly widen to reveal Margaret "near" tears as

she writes to Jimmy:

(voice over)
Dear Jimmy, Yes, I do get very
close to the people we treat.
In fact, there are some patients
I don't think I'll ever forget.
(pauses for a beat, then)
So you had your tonsils out. . .

The full impact of this sequence is not realized until Loretta Swit verbalizes the written words and provides the facial expressions needed to highlight what Koenig has written. Swit brings the necessary life to Margaret in the actual film of this episode. Again, this sequence is very static, with very little body movement occurring throughout. The majority of the shots are medium and medium close-ups of the various actors, with the exception of the close-up of Margaret at the close of the sequence. In the film, as opposed to "near tears" as specified in the directions, Margaret _is_ crying. What intensifies this sequence is the way Margaret acts and reacts to the situation in which she is placed.

After the previous humorous flashbacks, the intensity of Margaret's flashback offsets not only what has been seen prior to this action but also brings Act I to a dramatic close. Koenig says that this flashback occurs here because it provides a dramatic high point in the script and a stable ground for the story at the end of

this act. Moreover, it also lends more effect to the show to incorporate the drama into the comedy, thus exhibiting Margaret's emotional state. Margaret has become a more respected person, not only as a woman but as a good nurse and member of the family, as the seasons have progressed. The "Letters" episode reflects and reinforces the dynamic qualities of this character in all their complexity.

Unlike Hawkeye in moral tone and in character development is Major Charles Emerson Winchester III. His character differs greatly from that of his predecessor, Major Frank Burns. When Winchester joined the M*A*S*H crew in the sixth season, the creators wanted a "new villain--one it was hoped, who wouldn't become impossibly rigid because of a lack of intelligence or sensitivity."[20] Burns functioned as a comic butt to Hawkeye's, Trapper John's, and B. J.'s practical jokes; Charles, while he he may at times be subjected to the same treatment and either retaliate against them or ignore the pranks, represents a different view of the Korean War than that of Hawkeye, B. J., Margaret, Klinger, Father Mulcahy, or Colonel Potter. Because of his name and status in life, he believes that he should not be stationed with a M*A*S*H unit; he should either be stationed in Tokyo or be practicing in his homestate in New England. In his earlier appearances, when he came to temporarily

replace Frank Burns, Winchester repeatedly expected to be treated somewhat better than the other people in the unit: "Trumpeting his family name and upper-class heritage as though they were keys to respect and special privilege, Winchester is frequently rebuked by others in the M*A*S*H unit, giving his character a historical significance."[21] Winchester, in later episodes, has come to accept his distance from his home, does contribute in times of need, yet continues to serve, very successfully, as the antagonist to B. J. and Hawkeye. Still, he has his weaker moments as when he is nearly killed and travels to the front line in order to be closer to death, as he conceives it to be. Winchester is cooperative, when he chooses to be, especially in contriving schemes against B. J. and Hawkeye. More often, Winchester attempts to remain aloof, not participating in the regular M*A*S*Hers' antics, concerned primarily with his social position. This same attitude is expressed in the "Letters" episode when he does not want to participate in the letter writing.

After Hawkeye prepares to distribute the letters among the family, Charles rises to leave, and Hawkeye says, ". . . oh, here's one in crayon. Obviously for Charles." Charles retorts, "Ah, you are a wag. But I do not need to write letters to communicate with children. I have you for that, Pierce." Hawkeye

calls to him as he leaves the tent, "That is an insult and you'll answer for it at recess." This line of dialogue remains consistent throughout the drafts of the script. He becomes more irritated, later, when in "The Swamp" B. J. and Hawkeye read various letters to each other. He turns from his reading and states,

> Gentlemen, while your minds are understandably fascinated by reading pre-pubescent memoirs, I prefer great literature. So, if I may paraphrase my Turgenev. . . clam up.

However, in the first draft polish, he addresses B. J. and Hawkeye, by stating partially the same dialogue, except adds "stunted minds" and ends with, "please keep your tykes and toddlers to yourselves" rather than with "clam up." In the second polish, he concludes with, "I maintain they knew what they were doing when they put fences around playgrounds. Pity they also have gates." Yet, in the final draft, Charles's lines have been condensed so that they read, "Gentlemen, children and their pen pals should be seen and not heard," to which Hawkeye replies, "The only thing Charles remembers fondly from his childhood is his hair." B. J. cajoles Charles with the letter from the envious boy until finally Charles takes the letter and hurridly begins an answer to the boy: "My dear diminutive correspondent, your misinformation is exceeded only by your. . . (glances

at letter, squints). . .atrocious grammar." B. J. calls him "the world's first poison pen pal." The significance is the condensation of lines throughout the drafts. His answer to the boy displays his use of language usage the boy would not understand.

Charles' appearance at the opening of Act II again exhibits the pedantic attitude toward the letter-writing activity; this time, however, he is participating in answering the letters by recording his replies:

> . . .And in conclusion, Peter,
> I think it's perfectly normal for
> you to want to dress like a grownup.
> In fact, I might suggest that you take
> your father's best suit down to the
> tailor shop and have it altered to
> fit your little body to a tee.
> (chuckles evilly)
> My, my, isn't it fun to pass on
> one's wisdom to the younger generation?

He directs his question to B. J., who replies in the first draft, "Charles, you're all heartless, not to mention pad and pencil-less. What's with the boy?"; and in the last two drafts, he asks, "How come you're not using your pen Charles? Run out of venom?" In all of the drafts, with few minor variations, Charles replies,

> My dear Hunnicut, I prefer to record
> my brilliant insights and then
> delegate the typing to someone on
> the same intellectual level as these
> fourth graders. Suddenly, one Maxwell
> Klinger springs to mind.

The most serious moment, and totally different from his other appearances throughout the script, occurs late in Act II.[22] After the exchange between B. J. and Hawkeye, Charles and B. J. turn to their letters, the focus on Charles, as he reads,

> (voice over)
> 'Dear Doctor or Nurse, right now it is Autumn in Maine. Everything seems very beautiful. I don't know if you have Autumn in Korea, so I am sending you a leaf from a birch tree. I hope you like it.'

Charles' reaction to the letter and the birch leaf that he finds in wax paper is evident when he stops momentarily and reflects on "Autumn in New England." To hide his emtotion, after B. J. inquires about his whisper, Charles ays, "Ah. . . nothing. Just more childishness." The emotional impact is further evidenced when, instead of using his recorder, he decides to answer the letter by writing:

> 'Dear. . . '
> (checks letter)
> 'Virginia, it is with indescribable joy that I accept your gift. It is indeed testimony to the beauty that exists in all creation, but perhaps nowhere more than in a young girl's heart. . .'

Winchester is obviously very moved by the small token he has received from Virginia. Even though he

shrugs at the "childishness" when B. J. questions him, he allows himself a brief emotional moment. Koenig says of Charles, in this particular episode, that it is appropriate to his character if the audience sees him only momentarily responding as he does, "mundane qualities are beneath him, and to make him seem maudlin, this is about as much as he is going to give." He, like Margaret, is a very private person, revealing his true emotion only in privacy; and the writers respect this privacy and only periodically allow the viewer to see him in a situation like this.

The script scene is only briefly reflective of the other side of Winchester's staid character; the needed intensity is shown in the film when he reads the letter and looks at the leaf. In the film, Winchester is sitting at a desk lit only by a single light; he is secluded from B. J. and Hawkeye. He is shown in a medium shot throughout the sequence. His movement is accentuated when he pauses to look at the leaf and quietly utters, "Autumn in New England." He reflects the fact that he continues to miss his home as much as the others in camp do. But he hides his emotion when B. J. asks, "What's that, Charles?" He tries to ignore, for B. J.'s sake, the mere childishness of the letter. He cannot let B. J. see that he is reluctantly sincere and touched when he finds the leaf and begins to answer the

letter. He is very contemplative when he decides against using the recorder and begins to write the letter. Rather than give ridiculous advice to Virginia as he does to the little boy earlier, he is actually sincere when he responds to her gift. Also important to this brief moment is the placement, significantly because he, throughout Act I, answers the letters begrudgingly and remains the same up to this point in Act II. Structurally, the placement is surprising because the audience does not expect Charles to react in such a manner. Further, his action is very convincing to Charles' character and allows a small amount of insight into him.

Representing another aspect of the war is the commander of the M*A*S*H unit, Colonel Sherman T. Potter. Potter carries the knowledge of war, having served in World War I, World War II, and now in the "police action" of the Korean War; hence, he functions as the voice of experience. Unlike his predecessor, Henry Blake, Potter is more regimented in his life: he is not a philanderer, does not fish, but loves animals, especially Sophie, a gift from Radar, serves as a mediator in the operating room and as a father figure for the central crew of the unit:

> Col. Sherman Potter, commanding officer of M*A*S*H 4077, is a firm, no-nonsense soldier

> who joined the army in the days of the cavalry, lived through two world wars, ate his share of cold Spam on dry bread, and is now in charge of a makeshift hospital near the front lines in Korea. He is a gray-haired father figure to the young doctors and nurses serving under him, wishing only occasionally that he could "chew the fat with someone my own age."
>
> His role in TV's M*A*S*H is a vital one. It is Colonel Potter who gives age, perspective, and balance to the antics of the 4077.[23]

He will listen to Hawkeye's complaints concerning the war and Winchester's belief that he does not belong in Korea, tolerate Klinger's desire to secure a Section 8, deal with Margaret's personal and professional problems, and help Father Mulcahy gain a promotion, just as a father would deal with his own children. Sometimes, he becomes angry with the personnel, but most often he is tolerant. Always, Potter's demeanor remains basically consistent as he contends with "his family." Because of his experience in dealing with people, Potter understands the crises that his crew faces and supports the members and commands them properly. When the M*A*S*H unit has no incoming wounded, Potter spends his spare time either painting stills or capturing the look of disbelief on Winchester's face or riding his horse. Potter is a solid, caring character who is, at times, sentimental or cantakerous, but always strong.

In the "Letters" episode, Potter's appearance, when he has his flashback, alleviates some of the tension

from the preceding scene between Hawkeye and Father Mulcahy and lightens the serious tone that Hawkeye exhibits throughout the script. It is also the fifth and final flashback in the episode, indicating the importance of Potter's need to reinforce his commanding status in the unit. The action and dialogue vary minutely in the different drafts of the script in Potter's major sequence.[24]

At the outset of this sequence, Potter is seen preparing to soak his "barkin' bunions" that are bothering him because of the rain. When he is settled, he begins his letter:

> Dear Danny, Hell, yes. . .
> (scratches this out)
> Heck, yes, sometimes, we do get ants in our pants and you'd be surprised what little things will scare up interest. Why just the other day. . . [25]

Immediately following his last statement, heard in voice-over narration, the scene cuts to the exterior of the compound where the camera is focused on a basketball hoop. The directions read,

> A shot swishes through the net. We PULL BACK TO SEE Potter is idly taking free throws. He's wearing fatigue pants cut off below the knee, black, high-topped U.S. Keds and socks rolled down to meet the shoe tops. He retrieves the ball and prepares to take another shot. (Note: He shoots his free throws underhand.) People are walking by, Klinger approaches.

The action remains the same, except that in the first three drafts, Klinger approaches carrying papers. He addresses Potter, "Good Morning, Colonel Setshot, how goes the round ball?" Potter answers, "Aw, this game ain't been the same since they cut the bottom out of the peach basket." However, in the last draft, Klinger approaches and asks the same question, to which Potter states, "Shh. I got me a run of fourteen straight free throws and I don't want to break my concentration." Klinger is shocked by what Potter says ("Do these ears deceive me?"), and Potter who is trying to make his fifteenth shot turns impatiently to Klinger, "Sure, this is 'Hoops' Potter you're talking to. When it comes to basketball, I'm the bees' knees." Klinger hurridly attracts a group of people, who want Potter to break the camp record of thirty-one free throws, but Potter wants to keep his streak "on the QT."

The scene changes to show that some time has elapsed when the crowd cheers for Potter and yells "Twenty-eight." Potter angrily says to Klinger, "Thank you very much"; Klinger replies, in the first three drafts, "But sir, a little hero worship is to be expected. And you're such a cute little hero." However, Klinger's statement is deleted in the final draft. The dialogue changes to Margaret's cheer: "Sherman, Sherman, he's our man. If he can't do it no one can? Yaay, Sherman!"

Following everyone's cheer, Potter exclaims, "I feel like a damn fool," changed in the last draft to "sideshow freak." All the camp personnel participate in cheering for the Colonel, but the primary focus is placed on the central cast.[26]

As Potter prepares for his thirty-first shot, he receives words of inspiration from Klinger: "Only one more to tie. But there's no pressure. None at all. Just put it out of your mind that you're carrying the hopes and dreams of all these desperate people who have so little to cheer about." Potter yells, pulling away from Klinger, "Get away from me." Finally, Potter takes his thirty-first shot and misses, the crowd leaves, and Klinger, in the first three drafts, retrieves the ball and approaches Potter. He says, "You disappointed a lot of people," and adds bitterly, "I hope you're happy." In the final draft, Klinger performs the same action, but instead says, "You're still "hoops' in my book, Sir. No matter how many spirits you've crushed." He leaves Potter alone as he had been at the outset of this sequence, except this time he is "a forlorn figure holding a basketball." The directions indicate that during Potter's voice-over narration, the scene cuts from Potter's lone figure of defeat back to his tent, as he concludes and signs his letter, "Sincerely, Sherman T., formerly,

'Hoops,' Potter." As the scene closes, to test his ability, Potter takes a wadded piece of paper, shoots, and sinks it in a wastebasket, saying, "One."

Potter does not appear in the script again until the tag of the show, when the excitement is reversed. The most significant change in the drafts of the script is the elimination of Klinger's stationery idea (see note 12). This change allows for a more important conflict to be resolved: Potter's proof that he can score thirty-two baskets. In the tag, he runs into "The Swamp," exclaiming, "Hot Sausage. THIRTY-TWO!!!"

In the actual film, Potter exhibits his ability to control and command the crew from the outset when he seeks to subdue its complaining about the food and the weather. He sits among them and presides over the events until Klinger comes in with the letters. The entire opening sequence displays a sense of unity, shown in a medium shot of the table where the members are sitting. This opening shot reinforces the idea of the family structure as they are gathered for morning fare, no matter how awful the food is.

Potter's important appearance comes in Act II near the climax of the action. At the outset of this sequence, he is shown pouring the steaming water into a small container; the camera focuses on the steaming water, making it appear as though it is the rain. As

he toasts his "tootsies," Potter reads the letter, nods his head, wearing his glasses. Shown in a medium close-up, Potter resembles someone who should be cared for instead of being left to care for himself. And when he writes the letter, he begins as he would if he were talking to a friend or one of the crew with "Hell, yes. . ." only to realize that he is addressing someone much younger than he. Yet, he feels comfortable enough to use "Heck."

As the scene cuts to the compound where he is playing basketball, he is seen in his ridiculous playing clothes, his full basketball regalia. He looks more like a child, alone on a playground, simply wiling away his time, than he does an older commanding officer. He does not think that what he is doing is as spectacular as Klinger and the rest believe later. Progressing, the sequence shows his striving to prove that he can beat the camp record; even though he raises many protestations, he is receiving attention unusual for his position. This excessive attention makes him bellow before his thirty-first shot, "I need a drink," since he is carrying the "hopes and dreams of all these desperate people who have little to cheer about," on his shoulders. Klinger informs him of this fact as he massages Potter's shoulders though Klinger cannot rid him of the tension.

Also, reinforced in this sequence is that sense of unity: the members of the central crew congregate together in order to cheer Potter to victory. B. J. calls him "Big Man on Camp" and Hawkeye believes he could be recruited by the Army. Margaret is informal enough to address him as "Sherman" in her cheer, as does Charles, losing control, when he yells, "Come on, Shermy Baby." The focus shifts back to Potter, who shoves Klinger away from him, saying "I ought to stuff this ball in your big mouth," after which Klinger replies, "Ah, the temperament of the gifted athlete."

Potter not only is disturbed by the amount of attention he is receiving, but also hates the pressure that he feels by having to live up to his unit's expectations. He is their leader and guide and should be able to beat the record; however, he, like the others, is not perfect. When he misses the last shot, he is shown in a medium long shot, before the camera cuts to the crew as the members disperse with Margaret saying, almost in disgust, "I could've sworn he was going to make it," a line added in the film. To complicate the guilt further, Klinger adds in a sarcastic tone after having said, "You're still 'Hoops' in my book, Sir. No matter how many spirits you've crushed." After Klinger walks away, as he has been deserted by the others, Potter stands alone. The camera pulls back

to a medium long shot: Potter looks up at the basketball goal--the one element that took victory away from him and humiliated and dampened his spirit. He did not want the attention from the people in camp, and when he had it, he needed to prove to them and to himself that he could set a new record. He finally does set the record at the end of the film, when he runs into "The Swamp," exclaiming, "Hot Sausage! THIRTY-TWO!!!" By doing this, he restores faith in himself that he can retain his status among the members of his family, and instead of remaining quiet, he bursts into the tent, and looks like a gleeful kid in his basketball uniform, proving that he has set the record.

Potter, unlike Hawkeye, provides a different type of voice for the series: he represents years of experience and knowledge. He can, at times, empathize and sympathize with the others, but he does not seek to defy regulations, though, periodically, he will "bend" the rules to fit what is best for the others. He is a man of integrity who has sworn his allegience to the United States and has a great deal of pride in what he does for his country, even though he detests the sight of young men wounded and killed in the war. He is a family man who misses his wife, children, and grandchildren, but his life is bearable with his family in Korea, a family that provides support and confidence

in what it says and does.

# CHAPTER V

"Letters" is one episode of the M*A*S*H series that exemplifies what the writers strive to achieve in producing a script. The reaffirmation of characters through their elasticity is clearly exhibited in this particular episode, as it is in others. This script shows not only how the characters are conceived and depicted by the writers, but also how, throughout the various drafts of the script, Koenig altered the dialogue, primarily, to suite the respective characters studied. The ongoing characterization process requires that the writer allow his given characters the capability to grow and become more firmly well established. In "Letters," this concept--allowing the characters to reveal something about themselves or to reaffirm preconceived ideas--is established strongly throughout the script and is reinforced in the film.

Hawkeye is similarly characterized in "Letters" as he is in other episodes. He faces a trial which he must overcome himself. At the end of this experience, as he writes the letter to Ronnie Hawkins and watches Kwan Li, he still does not have all the answers to Ronnie's notion

that doctors repair wounded soldiers and then send them back to be killed; he cannot quite justify his participation in the war. Even though he saved a little Korean girl's life, he will continue to save wounded soldiers and will either send them home or send them back to face more action. He cannot feel good about that function; however, he does feel momentary gratification for the life he has just saved.

Margaret, over the seasons, has become a more compassionate Army officer, but has continued to believe in regulation. She displays that compassion, in her own quiet way, when she cries about the loss of life. Her role in the unit is an important facet to her character because she is the central woman in the unit. In "Letters," she exhibits a tender motherly quality. The situation is very serious, and her attitude complements what people would expect for a professional nurse--her compassion toward the soldier, her acceptance of his death, and her sentimental reflection on that moment. She is terribly moved by the experience and expresses her emotion when she is alone.

Charles, like Margaret, expresses sentimentality when he receives the birch leaf from Maine. He reflects on autumn in New England--a season and place brought closer to him through the leaf. This very brief moment is indicative of the character Charles has come to

represent: he will not reveal any part of himself, any sentimentality or emotion, unless he is alone. Otherwise, he carries with him a certain bravado in participating in the war. Moreover, he refuses to let anyone--Hawkeye and B. J., in particular--see him out of character; it is easier for him to maintain his snobbish attitude than to associate with his fellow doctors. Any brief insight into his character, any emotion that can be elicited from him, makes his character more dynamic, less static and boring.

Like the other characters, Colonel Potter does not want the camp members' attention; he wants time to be alone. Potter is very unobtrusive; most often, he hides his emotions in order to look after the other members of the family, except when he feels that he is under pressure. In "Letters," he faces that pressure; when he breaks the camp record for free throws, he does so alone.

What is common to all these four characters in this episode is that they resolve their conflicts alone. Though they are part of a family unit, they need a certain amount of privacy, yet they need the support from the other members of the group in order to maintain their sanity. Also, the fact that the writers respect these characters and their need to be alone is visible in "Letters," through the situations in which Koenig

places them. This episode reaffirms the characters according to the audience's perception of them. "Letters" succeeds in this reaffirmation because of Koenig's concept of the characters. His understanding is clearly seen in the way that he provides movement and dialogue appropriate to the respective characters. The script indicates characterization, but the characters are more fully embellished in the film, in the way that the actors portray them through action and dialogue.

M*A*S*H is a television series of high quality because it depends on the participation among writers, directors, producers, and actors, along with audience acceptance and reception of the show. What enhances this quality is the writers' belief in humanizing characters who are presented from week to week. Without this humanization, the series would have disappeared long ago because the characters would have become flat and uninteresting. This family will continue to exist in television because it successfully deviates from the regular situation and domestic comedy formulas; this difference creates and maintains, among viewers, interest and popularity. Even though the setting is limited, the series is unlimited because of the characters' versatility--their ability to grow and continually surprise or convince the audience of their actions in situations.

The characters are not always given clear resolutions to their problems because these solutions do not occur as easily in real life. This fact has made M*A*S*H one of the higher forms of television presentations since the writers combine humor and drama so that neither outweighs the other. The "Letters" episode proves that balance through Koenig's representation of the characters. This balance will continue through the eleventh season, the series' last, and will end its regular season with a two-hour movie special, a time period when the writers can further examine their closely-knit family members.

## NOTES

[1] Patterson Denny, dir., Making M*A*S*H, WTTV, Chicago, 1980. The actors, directors, producers, writers, and consultants express their ideas concerning the series, in this documentary presented on PBS. The documentary provided insight into what happens behind the scenes on the M*A*S*H set. The actors discuss ideas about their respective characters. The writers lend information about their work on the scripts and with the cast, throughout the writing process.

[2] For explanations concerning why the actors left the show, see David S. Reiss, M*A*S*H: The Exclusive, Inside Story of T. V.'s Most Popular Show (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1980). In his interviews with the actors, Reiss relates the stories behind their leaving the show.

[3] For this study, I obtained four drafts of the "Letters" script--first draft, first draft polish, second polish, and final draft--along with a story outline and a shooting schedule. All references to the various stages of the script will be noted in the text unless specified otherwise.

[4] Cyclops [Richard Schickel], rev. of M*A*S*H, Life, 27 October 1972, p. 16.

[5] Gerald Clarke, "Viewpoints," rev. of M*A*S*H, Time, 3 November 1972, p. 95.

[6] James Monaco, American Film Now (New York: New American Library, 1979), p. 317.

[7] Horace Newcomb, TV: The Most Popular Art (New York: Anchor Press, 1974), p. 41-43. Newcomb writes, about the situation comedy, "Situation comedy, like most television formulas, does not conform to the artistic standards of 'high' art in the development of action, character, event, and conclusion. Events, the things that 'happen' in sitcom, are composed solely of confusion, and the more thorough the confusion, the more the audience is let in on a joke that will back fire on the characters, the more comic the episode. Individual shows are

frequently structured on various layers of confusion that can be generated out of a single complication. Like parentheses within parentheses, the characters slip into deeper and deeper confusion. Expression and reaction follow complication, gesture follows reaction, slapstick follows gesture" (p. 33). Newcomb further points out, "At the center of the situation, complication, and confusion stand the characters of the situation comedy. They are cause and effect, creator and butt of joke, the audiences' key to what the formula meant. . . . that formula allows for little real development, no exploration of idea or of conflict; the stars merely do what they have always done and will continue to do so well. The characteristics of these favorites the things that identify them, cut across program types and create not individual actors, but situation comedy stars, a television unit. We expect these characters to behave in certain ways, and if we have our favorites. . . they will more than likely do the same things, react in the same ways, within their stylistically individual manners" (p. 34).

[8] Newcomb, p. 43.

[9] Newcomb, p. 226.

[10] E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, Inc., 1954), p. 68.

[11] Telephone Interview with Dennis Koenig on 19 February 1982. All further references to Koenig are taken from this interview, unless otherwise noted.

[12] In the first three drafts of the script, Klinger's chinchilla breeding farm receives much more attention than it does in the final draft, merely placed in his flashback. Formerly, he had stationery printed for the farm, and when the farm fails because of the chinchillas' sexes, he cuts the letterhead off and distributes among the other members of the group for letter writing. He even advertises the stationery for schoolwork when he writes his letters. In the tag, originally, he receives an order for several reams of the special square paper first from the teacher, then from a student. However, in the final draft, the idea of stationery is deleted completely, due to the fact that Potter's scoring the thirty-two baskets is more important and to the time-limit.

[13] What is continually pointed out about the staff, cast, and crew on the M*A*S*H set is that they work closely together. After the writers finish the first

draft of a script, they and the members of the cast discuss the script: which lines are not believable to a certain character, what a character would or would not do. After the first draft, the writers, taking these suggestions, re-write, all with input from the central cast. They also have to condense due to the thirty-minute format. Koenig states that "a lot of good stuff ends up on the cutting room floor" because of the time limit set on the show and the writers.

[14] Roger L. Hofeldt, "Cultural Bias in M*A*S*H," Society, July/August, 1978, p. 97.

[15] In the first draft, B. J. states, "Ronnie Hawkins might not appreciate that, but it's true," and Hawkeye responds, "I also fix people up to be killed or to kill others. I am a vital part of this ugly insane process." In the firstdraft polish, B. J.'s wry comment "What are any of us doing here?" is added. In the second polish, the dialogue remains basically the same. However, in the final draft, after "in essence, physician heal thyself," B. J. comments, "Chalk up an incomplete pass of the buck."

[16] In the first draft, B. J. says of the subdural hematoma, "We'll drill burr holes to relieve the pressure, then try to evacuate the clot." In the first draft polish, B. J. says, "Alright, let's drill, then try to evacuate the clot." In the final draft, Hawkeye says, "You were right, Doctor. She has a mid-line shaft. Probable subdural hematoma," which is changed in the film to "She's got a fracture." B. J. then states, "We'll have to evacuate the clot." The changes indicate an alteration in the style of language used, bringing the evaluation down to laymen's terms.

[17] In Hawkeye's original letter to Ronnie Hawkins, he explains, ". . .And believe me, Ronnie, I hate being a part of this war. Sometimes I hate me. But today I saved a little girl's life. Her injury had nothing to do with the war. And I was here to help when I was needed. A fortunate coincidence, I suppose. Saving one life could never make up for all the incredible ugliness, it can't compensate for the loss of your brother, but it's something. It's something good, and I'm going to remember it." His final answer to the boy leaves more questions and ambiguity about his justifying himself to Ronnie, thus no clear resolution. Ronnie might not have understood Hawkeye's operating on a Korean girl, especially since his brother was killed in Korea.

[18] Hofeldt, p. 97.

[19] Reiss, p. 97.

[20] Reiss, p. 90.

[21] Hofeldt, p. 97.

[22] In the first three drafts of the script, a brief exchange occurs between Charles and Hawkeye, when Hawkeye returns from Father Mulcahy's. He shakes water on Charles, and Charles retorts, "You mildewed moron, you're soaking me," to which Hawkeye replies, "No harm done, you've been all wet for years." However, it is deleted in the final draft. Its inclusion is not particularly necessary because it does not coincide with Hawkeye's mood displayed in the scene prior to this one. A brief look between Charles and Hawkeye would suffice to express what they say to one another in the first three drafts.

[23] Peggy Herz, "A SM*A*S*Hing Career Peak," American Way, June 1982, Vol. 15, no. 6, p. 68.

[24] Colonel Potter's character is easily recognizable through his language usage. He constantly uses old clichés that fit into his age bracket. Aside from his major flashback, he appears at the outset of the episode when the crew is grumbling about the weather and the food. In this sequence, he refers to "WW the First" when "It rained cats and daschunds" after which "the whole platoon went skinny dippin' in the trenches." When Klinger brings in the mail, he asks if Mildred has sent his "Clovereen brand salve" for his "barkin' bunions." Later, in Klinger's flashback, he chides Klinger for his chinchilla farm and asks if "Perhaps a stray anvil grazed the old noodle?" Then he comments "If my brogans meet up with just one chinchilla chip, it's the hanging tree for the whole clan." He uses the same type of language in his flashback when he refers to a "peach basket" as a basekt-ball hoop and at the end of the show when he shouts, "Hot Sausage!!!"

[25] Only minute changes occur in Potter's answer to Danny: "But when you're short on sorts, you'd be surprised what little things can spark up interest," in the first draft. In the first draft polish, he writes, "we do get a little antsy around here" changed to "ants in our pants" in the second polish and final draft. The dialogue is smoother after these changes, even in the film.

[26] The central crew's cheers remain the same in all drafts: B. J. claims that Potter is a "BMOC. Big Man on Camp," and Hawkeye adds, "You should be the Army's

first draft choice." Mulcahy exclaims to Charles, "My, this is quite exciting." Charles cries, "Come on Shermy Baby!" and catches himself, "Good Lord, I had no idea I was this desperate for entertainment." Though the other members of the camp cheer for him, Potter receives his greatest applause from these people.

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