

Character Study: Eleanor Arroway ("Contact")

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Backstory

Name: Dr. Eleanor Anne Arroway. Called "Ellie" by friends and co-workers.

Date of Birth: 8 August, 1964. DePire, Wisconsin.

Parents: Mother, Joanna, died from complications during childbirth; Father, Theodore, died of heart attack 10 November, 1974.

Siblings: None.

Height: '5"4

Weight: Approximately 110 lbs.

Physical Characteristics: Long blonde hair, blue eyes, fair skin, fine facial features. Small-boned, physically fit & attractive.

Occupation: Scientist, astronomer.

Marital Status: Single.

Religious Beliefs: At outset of film, Dr. Arroway holds no religious beliefs and would be termed a skeptic, perhaps even a hostile one. By film's conclusion, Eleanor undergoes a profound spiritual transformation, yet her critical faculties and innate skepticism remain intact. She comes to believe that "we are not alone," trusting that the spiritual experience she undergoes (sic) was legitimate *at some level*, though she cannot explain it or prove its authenticity.

Résumé: Early scholastic testing indicated high predisposition toward science and mathematics; father Theodore, advised by education specialists to nurture these proclivities, did so "conscientiously;" Ms. Arroway graduated high school in 1979, two full years ahead of schedule; awarded full scholarship to MIT, graduating Magna Cum Laude; completed doctoral work at CalTech; her "breakthrough" work there "dramatically increased the *sensitivity* of... radio telescopes;" Arroway then offered teaching position at Harvard, which she turned down to pursue search for extraterrestrial life at Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico; decline in National Science Foundation funding precipitated several unsuccessful attempts to secure underwriters for continued celestial observation; eventual funding comes from billionaire S.R. Hadden of Hadden Industries; Ms. Arroway subsequently discovers "radio messages" from the star "Vega" and becomes second American to attempt physical contact with its intelligent life.

Character Tree

Feet: Psychologically, Ms. Arroway does not operate from a strongly instinctual vantage-point. When she *does* act instinctually, her movements are precise and to the point (as when she races back to the Observatory upon discovering the radio messages, at once running, relaying information and barking instructions; or, emotionally overwhelmed to see what she thinks is her dead father, having the presence of mind to record the event within seconds of "his" appearance).

Groin: In a sexual sense, Ellie isn't particularly driven by "desire" or appetite; she has one such encounter in the film, and even then it is brief and superseded by other concerns she deems more important. However, her desire to discover intelligent celestial life is very strong indeed. That desire is linked to childhood

fantasies of contacting her deceased mother and, later, her dead father via short-wave radio.

Heart: Which brings me to one of Ellie's strongest character traits: her obsessive *need* to discover intelligent life in the universe. This need is, of course, an abstract projection of Arrowway's unconscious or "forgotten" need for reunion with the parents she has lost. The need to discover intelligent life in the universe, rather than a need to believe in God, is the need of an individual whose experience in life has led to an initial rejection of a "capricious God" and subsequent abandonment of the God concept altogether. Even so, at the deepest level Ellie still needs to *know* -- not just believe -- that "we are not alone," and in large measure this is why the skeptic Arrowway turned to a search for extraterrestrial life in the first place.

Throat: The characteristics of will, intensity and imagination are hallmarks of Arrowway's personality, and are strongly linked to the need for "contact" described above. Ellie possesses an iron will to achieve her ultimate goal, an "outward-directed will that is result-orientated," if you will. Arrowway's will power and intensity spring from the hurt of loss and are fueled by a deep and abiding anger in reaction to it. In many ways she is the "classic outsider with attendant chip-on-shoulder." She's not a misanthrope, but she does believe the government and money elites (and, perhaps, the great unwashed as well) are ignorant, short-sighted and lacking in imagination. Arrowway is a persuasive and articulate advocate for her cause, her ability to enchant considerable. And, skeptical scientist though she is, Eleanor is a dreamer; she lives very much in the realm of her imagination, wondering if "anyone is out there."

Crown: If Dr. Arrowway is the classic outsider, she is also fired by an unwavering inspiration. Throughout the film, she is in constant conflict with those who consider her an impractical, naive flake bent on throwing away a brilliant

career in pursuit of non-existent little green men. Yet perhaps the most prominent feature of Arroway's character is the overpowering *passion* she brings to her quest, a passion inspired by a deeply felt fascination with the ultimate mystery of human existence -- who are we, and why are we here? -- and the possibility of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe. Throughout the film, Arroway never veers from this sustaining inspiration, and her vision of possible contact with extraterrestrials and their intentions toward humankind remains consistently positive. She feeds off this sense of inspiration, just as she feeds off of her anger.

Right cheek: Ellie is wise in that she trusts herself and her vision completely, refusing to let others dictate her actions. If personal integrity and honesty are facets of wisdom, she likewise possesses these qualities to a marked degree and prizes them highly. That said, Ellie is an individual very much in the making; the entire trajectory of her life suggests a search for psychological, spiritual and emotional meaning, and the meaning of knowledge is one definition of the word wisdom.

Left cheek: Within her profession, Dr. Arroway is extremely knowledgeable. Outside of it, she knows a good deal about loss, but because of this she knows less about love. She loves her work and her colleagues, true, but the loss of her parents, especially the father she so revered, has stunted her emotional development in relationship to romantic involvement. For a large portion of the film she exhibits that classically male syndrome, "fear of intimacy." Eventually, through her relationship with Palmer Joss, she learns something about how to love another human being, and that knowledge is transformed into a kind of wisdom by picture's end.

Left shoulder: Judgment is a double-edged sword for Ellie. On one hand, she judges those she considers gullible (the devoutly religious) stupid (business and

government personnel) and cynical (her relentlessly self-promoting boss, David Drumland) very harshly indeed. On the other hand, by dint of her obsession with contacting "E.T's," she has long suffered the derision (and patronizing dismissiveness) of her boss, the scientific community, and the money men/government bureaucrats she detests so much. Arroway grows more tolerant of religious belief as her relationship with spiritually-minded Palmer Joss develops, but it isn't until her own "spiritual experience" in the last third of the film that Ellie releases many of the safe certainties and judgmental attitudes toward others she's carried up to that point.

Right shoulder: Ellie *does* possess compassion, and exhibits a caring, conscientious and thoughtful nature throughout the movie. As someone who's ruled almost equally by head and heart, her compassionate impulse is an abstract one: an important part of her search for intelligent non-human life is based on a desire to heal the existential loneliness of human beings.

Right hip: Unlike her immediate superior, Dr. Drumland, Ellie is not motivated by lust for personal glory in the slightest. This trait isn't even on the radar-screen.

Left hip: From the moment young Ellie Arroway decided to search for extraterrestrial life -- a semi-conscious reaction to the loss of her parents -- she has been working for "victory." As noted, personal glory doesn't interest her, but it's safe to say that vindication does. More, "the victory of communion," if you will, is Ellie's ultimate goal; a victory not only for herself, but for all humankind. And as she tells Palmer Joss, she's willing to give her life for it.

Character Development

ACT I: **Block 1** *Scene 1*: Ellie at eight years old, talking to a short-wave radio operator thousands of miles away in Pensacola, Florida. She asks her dad if there is life on other planets; "I don't know," he replies, " but if there isn't, it seems like an awful waste of space." Then Ellie asks if it's possible to contact her deceased mom via radio. Her father demurs. "I'm going to need a bigger antenna, " Ellie says resolutely to herself. At a very young age, she's looking for a way make sense of loss and a concrete method of effecting reunion. *Scene 2*: Cut to contemporary Puerto Rico, where the adult Ellie arrives at Arecibo Observatory, impatient for immediate "dish time" to begin her celestial observations; she meets the blind Kent, a fellow scientist, and endures an embarrassed silence from colleagues when she reveals she's looking for "little green men." Her words are self-deprecating but it's clear Dr. Arroway will follow her vision regardless. Kent reveals that Dr. David Drumland, Eleanor's superior, has described her as "brilliant, driven, a pain in the ass, and bent on professional suicide." Ellie shrugs this evaluation off with some effort but gets down to work immediately.

ACT II: **Block 1**: *Scene 3*: At village market/restaurant. Ellie: glasses, jeans, T-shirt, no make-up. Young, "mysterious," good-looking stranger Palmer Joss tries to pick her up, plying Ellie with questions about her work (which he seems to know about). Arroway doesn't bite when Joss gives her a chance to slam Dr. Drumland. Joss gives her a compass from a box of Cracker-Jack. She returns it, implying she knows exactly where *she's* going, and refuses his request for a date. Ellie is interested but wary, even a bit patronizing. *Scene 4*: Drumland arrives at Arecibo; Ellie runs panting to greet him formally, but he dismisses her with a crack about "E.T.'s." Ellie to herself: "Asshole." *Scene 5*: At reception party for Drumland, who tells Ellie's co-workers that the government shouldn't waste money on "pie in the sky research." Ellie challenges him, somewhat heatedly. Enter Palmer Joss, who impresses Ellie by taking on Drumland *visa vi* "scientists who deify technology at the expense of human values." Drumland reveals that Joss is a "priest" of sorts, which surprises and intrigues Arroway. *Scene 6*: Arroway and Joss under the stars as she explains

how her quest for extraterrestrial life began at an early age, and her passion, wonder and curiosity are evident. Joss replies that if there is no other intelligent life in the universe, "it would be an awful waste of space." This surprising echo of her father's words makes Ellie feel closer to Joss, and increases her attraction to him. They kiss.

Block 2: *Scene 7:* Ellie and Palmer at Ellie's bungalow in bed, relaxed and intimate. Joss explains his conviction that, after a spiritual experience, he knows he's not alone, that God exists. Ellie replies skeptically that perhaps some part of him *needs* to believe this. Joss asks if she is close to her father. "I was. He died when I was 9 years old. I never got to know my mother." When Joss replies that it must be tough being alone, Arrowway looks past him and says "Yeah." From that moment she begins to close down emotionally. *Scene 8:* Cut to flashback of Ellie finding her father unconscious on the kitchen floor, and rushing in slow motion to get his heart medication. Dissolve to bare winter trees and funeral reception at Arrowway home. Ellie sits brooding on the front steps as priest stands over her, mouthing platitudes about "God's plan" and how we aren't meant to understand it. Ellie replies in monotone: "I should have kept the medicine down stairs," standing up to look down on the priest. At *that* moment, she has rejected God, religion, faith. Dissolve to later, same night. Ellie at short-wave radio, trying to contact her father. *Scene 9:* Cut back to bed scene. Ellie completes her emotional withdrawal from Joss. Getting up abruptly she dresses hurriedly "for work" while rejecting Palmer's attempts to reconnect, refusing his requests to see her again in a distant, preoccupied tone. Her behavior caricatures the male "fear of commitment." cliché. She is desperate to flee from painful memories long buried, threatened by Joss' attempt at intimacy and the possibility that he will discover her emotional vulnerability. In a telling moment after her escape, she drops the in-a-hurry act and stands for a long moment in front of the bungalow, a pained expression on her face.

Block 3: *Scene 10:* Learning that Dr. Drumland has cut off funding for further observation, a furious Ellie drives her jeep in reckless fashion to confront him (making colleagues scatter as she does). Drumland delineates dire career consequences of Arrowway's "E.T. research," and she spits in

reply, "*So what? It's my life!*" *Scene 11:* Ellie set to leave Puerto Rico to seek outside funding. Packing, she sees a note from Palmer Joss asking her to call him. The Cracker Jack compass lies next to it. Arroway picks up the phone -- to call Kent, not Palmer Joss. Packed and ready to go, she returns to the bungalow one last time, to stare at the note and hold the compass. A long pause as she stands considering. Then, unable to deal with the possible ramifications, she gently places the compass next to the note and with slow deliberate movements, turns to leave. *Scene 12:* Ellie dressed smartly to present her case to officials at Hadden Industries. The initial rejection of funds for her "less like science and more like science-fiction" proposal sparks another impassioned, articulate outburst in which Dr. Arroway pleads for "the tiniest bit of vision" on their part. Regaining her composure, she apologizes before revealing that after 13 months, Hadden Industries was her last hope. Dejectedly preparing to leave, Ellie hears a phone ring and she is told "you have your money." Arroway notes the overhead camera focused on her and mouths "Thank you" in its direction as she retreats.

ACT III :**Block 1:** *Scene 13:* "Four Years Later:" Observatory in New Mexico. Kent tells Ellie that scientific community, government officials, and Dr. Drumland are increasing pressure to cut off lease of government-owned telescopes (sic). Ellie continues to cling tenaciously to her dream, telling her colleagues that she'll go it alone if necessary -- "I've done it before." *Scene 14:* Ellie, alone, listening for signals in the desert. She discovers a radio pattern and rushes back to the observatory, leaving little doubt as to who's in charge as she coolly barks orders and relates data over a cell phone at the same time. *Scene 15:* Military units, National Security agent Michael Kitz, and Dr. Drumland arrive on scene; Ellie is elated by her discovery but hostile to government intervention. As a second, image-based message is received from "Vega" (sic), Arroway is completely absorbed in her work, enjoying every moment of it and oblivious to the government types, but not to Drumland's officious behavior. *Scene 16:* Presentation of facts at White House press conference. Arroway nervously shuffles index cards. As she does, David Drumland steps to the podium as "man in charge," commandeering attention and completely cutting Ellie out of picture. A deeply hurt expression

crosses Arrowway's face as she slowly sits down. She resents his stealing the spotlight, and we see that as a woman and professional "inferior" to Drumland, it is a bitter pill to swallow. Yet, significantly, receiving a cell call from Kent, she quickly changes gears and returns to what's most important to her: the discovery. *Scene 17:* Ellie in car outside N.M. Observatory, now besieged by media circus and all variety of gawkers, celebrants, and fanatics. Ellie is discomforted and her distaste is evident. One fundamentalist railing against the excesses of science gives her the creeps as he stares right at her. She closes car window, unsettled. Her discovery has set forces in motion that she fears.

Block 2: *Scene 18:* Ellie receives mysterious message to meet billionaire recluse S. R. Hadden. Greeting her, he runs a biographical videotape of her life and knows more about her past than she likes. He reveals that he has had his eye on her for a long time, and thus gave the go-ahead for funding four years earlier. She awkwardly thanks him, and her discomfort at being in any way dependent is clear. Hadden gives Arrowway translated "specs" that will restore her position of authority on Vega project. *Scene 19:* Arrowway demonstrates that the specs are plans to build a transport device for interstellar travel to Vega. She combats National Security agent Kitz' suspicious attitude with persistent remarks that all evidence suggests "the aliens" are benign, exhorting the officials to exhibit trust. *Scene 20:* White House reception for those working with the president on the Vega project, including Palmer Joss, who has become a "spiritual advisor" to President Clinton. Showing that she has come to respect his opinion whether or not she agrees with it, Ellie demonstrates growth by revealing that she's taken the time to read Joss' best-selling book criticizing the spiritual vacuity of our technological age. Yet in conversation Ellie posits that belief in God is merely mass delusion, and insists on proof of "his" existence. Joss shoots back that Ellie "prove" she loved her father. Ellie isn't convinced by this rhetorical device, but the fact that she offers no ready reply suggests that she is becoming more open to a non-logical perception of reality. Joss reveals that he is on a special Selection Committee of experts, scientists, theologians, etc. to choose who will represent humankind in its attempt to contact the Vegans. He gives her the Cracker Jack compass

Scene 20: Arroway meets Joss in a D.C. park, telling him that contact with interstellar intelligence is worth the price of her life, knowing that if she's selected, she will likely never see him again. In another sign of emotional development, however, she has reached the point where she cares enough about Palmer to admit, "I'm confused." For Dr. Eleanor Arroway, whose single-minded goal in life has been the discovery and contact with intelligent celestial life, this is something of a breakthrough.

Act IV.: **Block 1:** *Scene 20:* Selection Committee hearings. Dr. Arroway's testimony is extremely impressive and she seems a shoe-in for selection. Then Joss asks if she believes in God. At first Arroway dodges this land-mine, questioning its relevance. Informed that the selectee must embody the values of the large mass of humanity, Ellie will not betray her own integrity and refuses in good conscience to tell the Committee what it wants to hear. Her honesty torpedoes her chances, and David Drumland, appearing next and having no such qualms, cynically affirms his belief in the Almighty. Drumland is chosen to go. *Scene 21:* Angry at Joss for raising the religious question but by now in love with him, Ellie returns the Cracker Jack compass by folding it silently in his hands. It's a gesture of farewell, and Arroway makes it knowing she's lost the possibility for real love. *Scene 22:* At mission site, Drumland attempts to apologize to Ellie for his maneuvering, saying he wishes "the world were a place where the kind of idealism you demonstrated before the Selection Committee was rewarded, not taken advantage of." Ellie does not lose her composure, but replies evenly, even sadly, that "I've always believed that the world is what we make it." Though once again thwarted by Drumland, Ellie (who *had* made a cynical comment of her own about the relative "PR value" of her presence on site) refuses to accept his *real politick* view of the world. Arroway's idealistic nature has not changed. **Block 7:** *Scene 23:* The fundamentalist fanatic who so troubled Arroway previously succeeds in destroying the alien transport (and killing Drumland) by exploding a bomb on site. *Scene 24:* Ellie, back at New Mexico Observatory, watches a news report featuring a videotaped statement recorded before the explosion by the fanatic; she shakes her head in disbelief at his ignorance, her dominant reaction one of deep sadness. Colleague Kent appears, and though

it's Ellie who's apparently lost the best chance to fulfill her dream, she reaches out to comfort the devastated Kent. In the midst of her own inner turmoil, Arroway acts on her sense of compassion for another. *Scene 25:* Disconsolate, Arroway returns to her apartment and receives a message from Hadden: under his control, a second transport was actually built, and Ellie is his choice to take the trip to Vega.

Act VI: **Block 1:** *Scene 26:* Palmer Joss, having learned Ellie is to go, appears to say goodbye, once again giving her the Cracker Jack compass. Ellie accepts it and is happy at his return. Again, she seems to have grown emotionally. Instead of refusing to see him and withdrawing emotionally, as her previous behavior might suggest, Arroway is instead now open to the emotional involvement that has developed between them. *Scene 27:* Flanked by two technicians, Ellie makes her way -- alone again -- to the transport. It's a supreme existential moment, a point of no return, and she knows this. Nevertheless, she proceeds. *Scene 28:* The transport experiences turbulence and Ellie's video hook-up to mission control cuts out repeatedly. Mission leaders discuss whether to abort, but Arroway (doubtless suppressing the need to gag) keeps repeating, "I'm OK to go." It's a tense situation and she is very discomforted and anxious, but the determination to fulfill her dream is paramount. Her desire to make contact supersedes all else, and the scene illustrates how desperate that desire is. *Scene 29:* "Blast off:" continued turbulence and uncertainty as Ellie appears to hurtle through worm holes, etc. Discomforted though she is, Arroway continues to record and describe the experience as best she can, once again demonstrating her poise under pressure. This point is highlighted as "ghost images" of Ellie play across the screen, spouting phrases like "Oh, God!" to indicate her internal anxiety (sic!). *Scene 30:* At one point, the Cracker Jack compass that has become a symbol of Arroway's relationship with Palmer Joss escapes her grasp and floats weightlessly in the transport. It's a measure of just how much Ellie has grown emotionally, how much her feelings for Joss have grown, that Arroway actually unfastens the protective straps about her body to get up and retrieve it. *Scene 31:* The power cuts out and Arroway is left in darkness,

floating freely. She seeks to get her bearings and then turns to notice a spectacular interstellar mosaic of stars, suns, etc. As Ellie views this panorama, her eyes widen in sheer wonder and joy. Her awe is almost (forgive me) orgasmic: "Some... celestial event. No... no words.... to describe it." Her eyes well with tears. "*Poetry*... They should have sent a poet. So beautiful.... so beautiful... so beautiful... so beautiful. I had no... idea..." This last phrase is repeated in voice-over several times as *Scene 32*: Ellie descends, in near-fetal unconscious position, to a dream-like, tropical shoreline. She regains consciousness, orients herself to the surroundings, and then sees a shimmering figure moving toward her. She hits the "record" button as the figure transforms into an image of her dead father. Initially overcome with feelings of love at the evident reunion, Arroway pulls back from their embrace to declaim "you're not real." The "alien" acknowledges this and goes on to explain that, essentially, intelligent life exists in the universe, that the "Vegans" have looked for and found other intelligent beings, and that "in all our searching, we've found the only thing that makes the emptiness bearable is each other."

Block 5. *Scene 33*: Ellie returns from her journey to learn that no proof exists to support her contention that the experience was, in fact, authentic. *Scene 34*: Dr. Arroway before a Congressional Inquiry. Palmer Joss is in attendance. Her inquisitors believe Arroway is deluded, probably the pawn in great hoax perpetrated by the now-deceased billionaire S.R. Hadden. Ellie has been scorned as an "E.T. dreamer" before, so her present status as societal outsider/dreamer is not entirely new here. However, internally, she has undergone a radical psycho-spiritual transformation. Like the religious types she previously held in contempt, it's now Arroway who has become the believer with no proof to back up her claims. Ellie is in very unfamiliar emotional territory here. Yet tellingly, her intellectual integrity and honesty remain undiminished as she truthfully concedes that the entire experience may have been a hallucination. ("As a scientist I must allow for that, I must volunteer that.") Pressed therefore to "admit that the whole thing never happened," she nonetheless responds in halting, poignant tones:

Because I can't. I... had an experience. I can't prove it, I can't even explain it. But everything I know as a human being, everything I know that I am tells me that it was real... I was given something wonderful, something that changed me forever -- a vision... of the universe that tells us how tiny... and insignificant... and rare and *precious* we all are. A vision that tells us that we belong to something that is greater than ourselves. That we are not -- that *none of us are alone*...

I wish... I could... share that. I wish... that... everyone, if even for *one moment*, could feel that awe and humility... and the *hope*.

But -- (Struggling mightily before regaining her composure) That continues to be my wish.

Scene 35: As waiting car prepares to drive Ellie and Palmer Joss away from Capitol Building thronged by spectators, fanatics, etc. Joss is asked whether he believes Arroway's story. As he begins to answer, Ellie, already in the car, takes his hand in hers. This action is hidden from the view of surrounding crowds. Ellie has reached the point of trusting the impulse toward relationship and real intimacy with another. Whatever may happen between the two, she no longer hides her most vulnerable feelings. Joss affirms his belief in Arroway, and her story. The car departs. *Scene 36:* "18 Months Later:" New Mexico Observatory. A relaxed Ellie explaining the wonders of the universe to a group of visiting children. Significantly, she does not attempt to sway them toward belief in extraterrestrial life. Her attitude encourages both healthy skepticism *and* open-mindedness. "The most important thing, " she tells them as they leave, " is that you all keep searching for your *own* answers." *Scene 36:* Ellie alone in the desert, ruminating on the nature of the universe. It seems clear that she believes "the experience" was valid at some level, but it's equally clear that in her own mind, she will never be entirely certain. A faint smile crosses her face. She realizes that in important respects she remains "existentially alone," but somehow less so; maybe believing in what you can't see, if only a little, isn't such a bad thing after all. Ellie has found a degree of peace. Her search *will* continue, but the freneticism and desperate need have disappeared.