

ENHANCING THE TALE

There are various ways in which a writer can make a narrative more dramatic, dynamic, and engrossing. To this end, ENHANCING THE TALE concentrates on those methods and devices that Story has that can improve how a narrative is able to work more effectively. For example, setting a time limit on the action task, establishing a theme, making use of a sub-plot or creating an image system. It should be stressed that these aspects of Story are always part of the fabric of the tale, and never, as it were, 'added on'. However, as the tale is being constructed and redrafted, certain key moments can be focused on and enhanced. Many writers, for example, often say that it is only after finishing the first draft that the theme is revealed – and that's when the writer can go back and finds ways of making the story values clearer.

Hook, Back Story and Prologue looks at the importance of the initial 'hook' of the tale, how back story can give depth to your character, plus some examples of the use of prologues in stories. [PAGE 4](#)

Turning Points explores what you might call the 'gear changes' in a story, namely plot twists and surprises. This chapter specifically looks at recognitions, realisations, self-understandings, plus those unexpected changes to the opposite that seem to happen so often in thrillers and mystery tales. [PAGE 26](#)

The Ticking Clock takes a look at the use of deadlines and literal ticking clocks in stories, plus how trains and the countdown to New Year can both act as ‘clocks’ in a tale. [PAGE 47](#)

Sub-plots: Types and Functions explores the different types of sub-plots, their relationship to the main plot and how they function within a story. [PAGE 66](#)

The Art of the Sub-plot: HAMLET, THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION and THELMA & LOUISE considers in detail the sub-plots in William Shakespeare’s HAMLET and Stephen King’s THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION. [PAGE 81](#)

Theme, Values and Axis of Conflict considers Story theme as well as the controlling values of the tale and the axis of conflict that is brought about by the action of the drama. [PAGE 97](#)

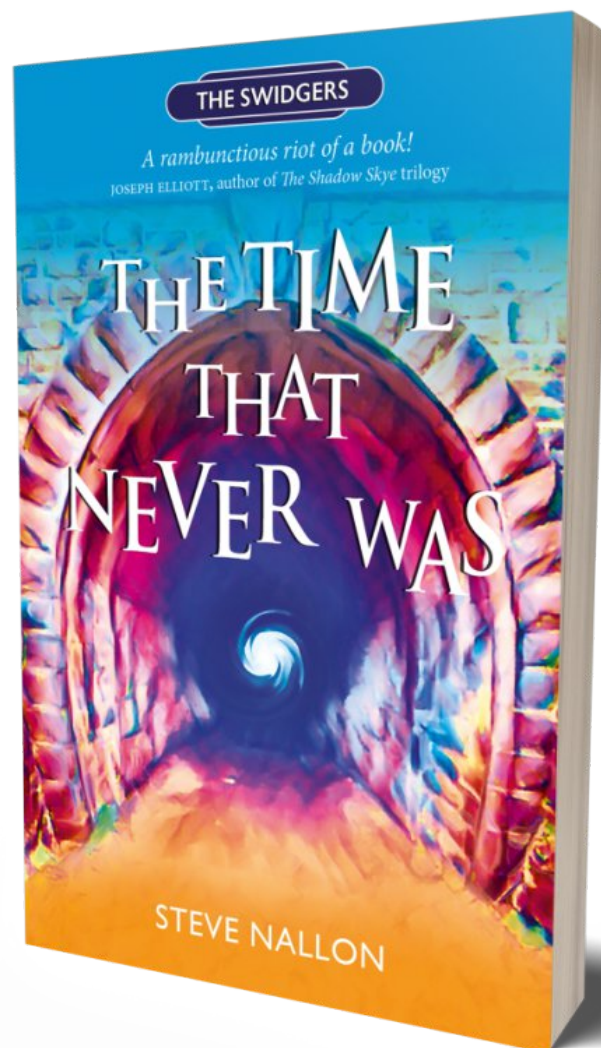
Story Dynamics, Pacing and Rhythms explores the importance of changing the dynamics of narrative, plus the ways this can be achieved, for example, comic relief and musical interludes. [PAGE 112](#)

Progressive Complications, No Escape and Inexorability considers the importance of the growing momentum and jeopardy in a narrative. [PAGE 126](#)

The MacGuffin, The Dramatic Gap looks at the idea of the ‘MacGuffin’, the object, often of unexplained significance, that is the ‘want’ of the protagonist. This chapter also looks at what story gurus call the ‘dramatic gap’, meaning the difference between expectation and result. [PAGE 144](#)

Set-ups and Pay-offs examines the skills and techniques of setting up and then paying off story moments. **PAGE 149**

Imagery and Symbolism ponders the use of Image Systems or Symbol Webs, where visual metaphors and *motifs* are woven into the fabric of the narrative. **PAGE 169**



ENHANCING THE TALE

Hook, Back Story and Prologue

“In Hollywood one speaks of a school of first act writers. The ‘first acts’, that is, the beginnings of their stories, are very powerful, but the rest is disappointing... such stories are top-heavy, and no effort in rewriting can balance them, because no graduation is possible.

Television has aggravated this danger by its demand that the viewer be ‘hooked’ at the very first moment. Years ago, the filmmakers could count on a captive audience in the movie theatres, so they developed their expositions at a more leisurely pace. But today, when a nervous switching to another channel may bring about the demise of the series in the rat (rat) race, the viewers have been conditioned to beginnings that pack a wallop. And the moviemakers, aware that the theatrical films will end up on television, have increasingly speeded up their openings, to the point of capturing audience interest before the main title.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944) The revised 1972 edition.

The ‘Hook’

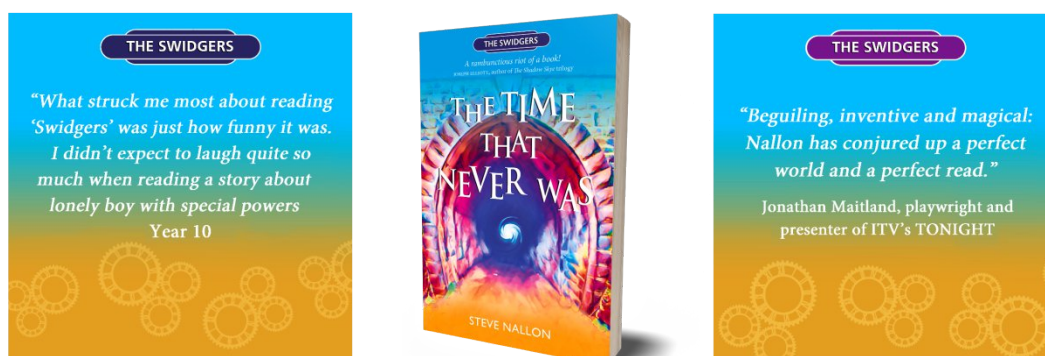
LION KING does it with a song. SUNSET BOULEVARD does it with a dead body floating in a swimming pool. MANHATTAN does it with a black and white skyline and George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. UP does it with a wordless love story in pictures. STAR WARS

does it with blue title-cards and a big brass score. RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK does it with the taking of a precious golden idol. And all in their own ways are fantastic ‘hooks’ or ‘teasers’.

In fiction, the power of the hook is in the opening line. “It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.” (1984 by George Orwell). “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” (THE GO-BETWEEN by L.P. Hartley). “This is my favourite book in all the world, though I have never read it.” (THE PRINCESS BRIDE by William Goldman). “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” (PRIDE AND PREJUDICE by Jane Austen). “Mr and Mrs Dursley of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.” (HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSOPHER’S STONE by J.K. Rowling). “All this happened, more or less.” (SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE by Kurt Vonnegut). Each has a different technique. There is the strangeness of ‘thirteen’, the ironic assumption of ‘universally acknowledged’, the colloquialism of ‘thank you very much’, the seeming contradiction of ‘never read it’ and ‘more or less’, plus that fascinating metaphor of the past being another ‘country’.

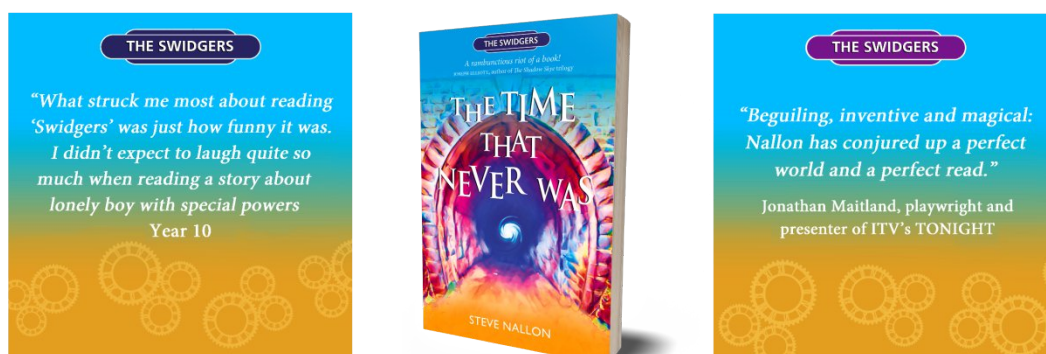
A hook at the beginning of your story or narrative offers a glimpse or snapshot of your character, your world or your theme. It can be a visual image, an action, a sound, a speech, an idea or just a still moment in time. But the key is a good hook immediately lets the

reader know the story's mood, for it creates an atmosphere, a feeling and the tone of your tale. Plus, of course, by capturing the reader's attention so early, the reader knows from those first words or that initial image that they're in safe hands. That said, the hook can sometimes catch you off-guard. The movie TITANIC is about Rose and Jack and the sinking of that ship in the Edwardian era, yet the film opens in the modern day with a deep-ocean research submersible exploring the sunken wreckage. If all you knew about the movie was that it was set aboard the R.M.S. Titanic over a hundred years ago then the footage of the broken vessel on the ocean floor might well surprise you. Perhaps then this film won't turn out to be quite what you expected.



The opening hook can also be expositional. A voice-over tells us, for example, the strange history of Hill House in *THE HAUNTING*. A hook can also indicate to the reader or the audience the greatest fear or past trauma of a character still haunting their life today. Their back story, if you will. This is the case in *VERTIGO* and *RED RIVER*. There is also the possibility of a Prologue hook, as in Shakespeare's

ROMEO AND JULIET and HENRY V, which can impart some information about the plot itself and even offer some foreshadowing of what is to come. In certain stories, especially historical tales, it's best to get as much exposition or story information out of the way as soon as possible. Thrillers often use the device of the news broadcast, where someone (often a journalist or expert) is seen doing a piece to camera that establishes the nuts-and-bolts of the situation. If done well, this can hook the reader or viewer in as to whatever is happening. Expository material may also be presented as sub-titles (or screen-titles or title-cards). Although one of the golden rules of story craft is 'Show, Don't Tell', sometimes, as in STAR WARS, on screen text can be a very effective method of dealing with story information. And this is the case with STAR WARS in the opening seconds of the movie – with the help, of course, of that great score by John Williams and a large bucket of popcorn.



In summary then, then hook operates as a kind of 'overture' to your story, setting the mood, the atmosphere or theme. In fact, in an action movie, the hook is known as the 'overture scene'. In 007

movies, this action is sometimes the left over climactic section of James Bond's previous mission. In the action caper ENTRAPMENT it is a complete mini-story of the theft of a painting. Of course, the tone for your film may be more comic, so perhaps a gag would be more appropriate. Laughter is a great hook and an excellent example of this can be found in WAKING NED, which sets a comic mood from the very start. The wife has gone to the kitchen to bring the husband some ice cream. The husband then begins to get excited back in the living room as he watches on the television the numbers being called out in the lottery. After the six numbers have been announced he suddenly becomes very excited indeed. The wife immediately enters from the kitchen and asks if they've won the lottery. He says no, but it did make you bring me my ice cream. And this isn't in any way a gratuitous gag, for the story is a farce about someone who won the lottery – and then immediately died of shock.

“Like lightning. So sharp, fierce and bright it blinded. And it's that flash where I must begin my story. I couldn't tell at first where it came from... except I knew, somehow, it wasn't the sky...”

The opening lines of THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, the first in the SWIDGERS book series



***'Most epic poets plunge in medias res
(Horace makes this the heroic turnpike road),
And then your hero tells when'er you please
What went before by way of episode,
While seated after dinner at his ease,
Beside his mistress in some soft abode,
Palace, or garden, paradise, or cavern,
Which serves the happy couple for a tavern.'***
Lord Byron, DON JUAN

In Medias Res

The phrase *in medias res* translates as 'in the middle of things' or 'in the middle of the action'. This can have two applications in storytelling. First, it can simply mean starting the story in the middle of some sort of event or ongoing action. For example, the waking up sequence in *FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL*, or the disfiguring of Delilah Fitzgerald's face with a knife in *UNFORGIVEN*. Second, *in medias res* can mean having a plot structure where you open your narrative in, as it were, in the middle of the story in terms of its time sequence. This needn't be in the exact middle of your tale, just later than what will be revealed to be the story's action. For example, the crisis point or the moment where the protagonist has an impossible choice to make. The structure of the story then via a flashback or some other narrative methods, goes back to where the tale began in terms of the inciting incident and so on. The time sequence maybe out of order, and so some indication of what will happens ends up

being given away, however, having the crisis moment at the top of your movie or on the opening page of your book can be a very dramatic way of hooking in the viewer or reader. And, of course, the hook raises curiosity as to how the character got himself into all that trouble in the first place, which then propels the reader or viewer forward into the narrative of the tale itself.

This second type of *in medias res* is a classic trope of the *film noir* genre, for example, DOUBLE INDEMNITY, SUNSET BLVD. and FAREWELL, MY LOVELY. In DOUBLE INDEMNITY, one of the great *film noirs*, the movie opens with the arrival of a man at his offices who has been shot and is now clearly dying. In SUNSET BLVD., a variation on the *film noir* with a famous actress as the *femme fatale*, the protagonist who is telling the story is already dead and floating in the swimming pool of a Hollywood mansion. CASINO and GOODFELLAS are also examples of this structural technique of *in medias res*.

Homer's ODYSSEY is a classic example of *in medias res*, in the sense in that the poem begins very late in Odysseus' story, almost in fact at its end. The way the plotting works is that it's only after Odysseus escapes Calypso island via a boat and later finds himself washed up on the shores of Phaeachia that his ten year journey is revealed. Once he arrives at the court of the King and Queen of Phaeachia, Odysseus is soon recognised. Odysseus then acknowledges who he is and begins to tell his story. In fact, the whole action of the poem takes only a matter of a couple of weeks in

terms of its plot, for it's through the telling of his tale at the court of Phaeachia that Odysseus' ten years of journeying is actually revealed. You could argue then that Odyssey narration at the court is the earliest – and longest – 'flashback' in the history of storytelling.

Some more thoughts on *in medias res*...

"Homer doesn't begin The Trojan War with Leda's twin eggs: he always rushes toward the outcome, and he carries the listener along with him into the middle of things, just as if they were familiar."

Horace

"I'll tell you my story in a way you can understand, with a beginning, a middle and an end. We'll start in the middle."

Professor Paradox, BEN 10: ALIEN FORCE

"We all – in the end – die in medias res. In the middle of a story. Of many stories."

Mona Simpson, American novelist

ELTON POPE: *That wasn't the first time I met the Doctor, and it certainly wasn't the last. Oh no. I just put that at the beginning because it's a brilliant opening.*

From the DOCTOR WHO episode *Love and Monsters* written by Russell T. Davies



“In the writer’s mind, even a back story has a back story.”

Terry a O’Neal

Back Story

Thirty years ago, the term ‘back story’ (or sometimes ‘back-story’ or ‘backstory’) would have been known only to story theorists and those who attended their lectures, but now it’s a phrase in everyday use across all media and even in adverts. In its widest sense back story simply means all the things that have happened to a character before we first see or read about that person in a film or story. In practice, however, there is usually some trauma or haunting incident from the character’s past that still troubles them. In fact, one particular story guru, John Truby, prefers to call this aspect of Story the ‘Ghost’, but whatever you want to call it, the back story is essentially the emotional open wound of hurt that comes from somewhere in the character’s history. A classic haunting of a character’s psyche is the idea they caused the death of the one they loved or with whom they worked closely. This conceit featured, for example, in WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT and THE HUSTLER. Sometimes whatever it was that occurred in the past can be the cause of a character’s present psychological or moral needs, but not always. However, there’s many a character’s psychology or morality that is never explained. There’s no emotional back story, for example, to say why Phil in GROUNDHOG DAY is so grumpy. It’s just

the way he is, though we can perhaps guess he wanted more out of life than being a weatherman on a local news network.

Back story can also be used as a turning point in the story, particularly if it involves recognition or the uncovering of a secret. A classic example of this is the slapping scene in CHINATOWN, where a case of incest is revealed. Motivation can also be connected to back story. In ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST it's only at the moment when 'Harmonica', as he is called, kills the gang leader Frank (Henry Fonda) that Frank and the audience realise that Harmonica's motivation was in his back story. You see, when a boy, it was Frank who killed Harmonica's brother in a cruel and horrible way. Frank put a noose round the brother's neck and placed his feet on the ever weakening shoulders of his little brother, who, it is revealed through the harmonica itself and the player's memories, was Harmonica.



But be warned, putting in a traumatic back story simply to explain away some sort of strange behaviour in a character can result in very sloppy writing. A crass one-line comment about a difficult childhood is a lazy way of explaining a seemingly inexplicable action

or motivation. And be warned too that putting in too much back story can undermine character. Do we really need to know all about 007's childhood or what made him a killer? He is what he is, pure Freudian Id according to some, and so shouldn't we just leave it as that and let him get on with killing the baddies, saving the world and having inordinate amounts of rumpy-pumpy?



In time travel stories, of course, the back story, though it happened in the past, can be altered. *BACK TO THE FUTURE* ends, for example, with a much better family situation than the dysfunctional one we witnessed at the beginning. This change is the result of Marty going back in time and altering the timepath of his mother and father. *FIELD OF DREAMS* though not a time travel story does have the father coming back as a kind of ghost come time traveller and in so doing helps both son and father to a redemptions – *If you build it, he will come... Ease his pain.*

“We don’t care about the hero’s state ‘before the story began,’ and we didn’t miss hearing how he felt or feels about himself before he vouchsafed the information. If we are to identify with the Hero, which is to say, to see her story as our own, she can have had no ‘state’ before the beginning of the story. For our journey to be her journey, it must begin at the same time.”

David Mamet



“What is the difference in being alone with another and being alone by one’s self?”

Henrik Ibsen

The Modern Malaise

A word here about Henrik Ibsen. There are few dramatists who have used back story so effectively as that particular Norwegian playwright, so perhaps it might be useful to take a few moments to look at some of his ideas.

It could be said that Ibsen essentially built his entire career on dramas constructed around a character’s past, a past which often included a hidden history. Perhaps a forged document, or an affair or a medical record involving syphilis. And in connection to whatever it is that is hidden, there is often a moral or social dilemma around the revelation of that secret.

But Ibsen's use of the back story goes beyond mere dramatic effect, for the idea of 'The Ghost' was central to his thinking, philosophy and psychology. Ibsen was a man living in what you might call the dawn of our modern world, but for Ibsen that world had a dark and melancholic underbelly. In a poem to a friend the dramatist compares the modern way of life to a journey across the sea:

"And yet — out on the open seas
 Half-way between our homeland and our end station
 It seems like our speed is slowing
 As if all our impertinence was stolen from us
 Crew and passengers, men, and women
 Walk about with clouded eyes, downturned smiles
 They collapse, brood, ponder, listen
 In poor man's cabins and luxury cabins
 (A voice tells the passengers:)
 'I believe we are sailing with a corpse in the cargo bed.'"

The emerging modern world for Ibsen certainly offers the speed and safety of a big ship, yet the people on it walk around, as the poem says, with 'downturned smiles'. Unhappiness and melancholia abound. And that corpse is more than a mere wound, it's something bigger. For Ibsen there's something corrupting and rotting right at the heart of our modern psyche. And the crisis and malaise of the modern era is so entrenched in today's thinking that a back story to explain that crisis or malaise is not even necessary. Modern living and modernism itself gives us our melancholia, particularly among men. Which you might argue in part explains the

unhappy disposition of Phil in GROUNDHOG DAY, plus the endless parade of men in ‘masculine crisis’ stories in the twentieth century. Think here of the plays of David Mamet and Arthur Miller.

Anyway, whatever the line ‘sailing with a corpse in the cargo’ in Ibsen’s poem was meant to mean, it has now being picked up as a poetic way of expressing the idea of ‘The Ghost’ in a character’s haunting ‘back story’ of Story theory.

“It is the very mark of the spirit of rebellion to crave for happiness in this life. What right have we human beings to happiness? We have simply to do our duty, Mrs. Alving! And your duty was to hold firmly to the man you had once chosen, and to whom you were bound by the holiest ties.”

Manders in Henrik Ibsen’s GHOSTS



“My name Is not Oswald! It’s Penguin. I am not a human being! I am an animal!”

‘The Penguin’ in Tim Burton’s BATMAN RETURNS

The Origin Story

There are specific types of back story that really should be called ‘The Origin Story’. Many examples of origin stories can be

found in comic books, where characters such as The Penguin or The Joker are given narratives that explain how they came to be as they are. This concept also applies to how superheroes such as The X-Men came to develop their special gifts or powers, plus fantasy tales that even have their own *mythos* as to how the Universe came into being.

“My whole life, I felt like an animal. I ignored my instincts. I ignored what I really am. And that won’t ever happen again.”

James ‘Logan’ Howlett / Wolverine



More thoughts on Back Story and the Origin Story...

“Be careful of thinking you know a person so well. Like comic books, everyone has an origin story... and oftentimes it ain’t pretty.”

H.L. Sudler

“I don’t think we need to know. Anybody think we need to? What you’re talking about is what the illiterate call the back story. You don’t need it. Remember the model of the drama is the dirty joke. This joke begins: ‘A travelling salesman stops at a farmer’s door’ Does the protagonist have to explain why?”

David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM

"The most important things to remember about back story are that (a) everyone has a history and (b) most of it isn't very interesting. Stick to the parts that are, and don't get carried away with the rest."

Stephen King, ON WRITING

"Back story is like a flavour you can't quite pick, lurking in the layers of a curry. You know it's there and it enhances the flavour, but it's intangible and fleeting. Use it sparingly!"
Sandy Vaile

"Life stories are best received in bars, and only then an hour or so before closing time, and if you are buying."

Stephen King in ON WRITING: A MEMOIR OF THE CRAFT

"Every story needs some sort of secret that impels it forward. Otherwise why would the reader bother to keep on turning the pages?"

Deb Loughhead



THE SWIDGERS

THE SWIDGERS – The Back Story

Back story then, in psychological terms, is an open wound of hurt from some past event or encounter. But what happens when your lead character is a teenage boy, as in the Time Adventure book series THE SWIDGERS? When you're dealing with a teenage boy, it can be difficult to create a meaningful back story in this sense of a past hurt or trauma. William is still very young after all. That said, William, like many characters in children's literature, is an orphan with a strong sense of not being wanted. Which is most definitely a wound of hurt. And it's this back story of William that connects to both his psychological and moral needs in that his feeling of abandonment has, at least in part, fed into his loneliness and unwillingness to engage.

It's revealed early on that William came from a Romanian orphanage, but then, after he was taken in back to England, his adoptive mother suddenly died. And perhaps he feels some sort of guilt because of that. However, the true nature of his lineage, the mystery of his history and the reason both his mothers died, both the natural mother and the one who adopted him, are not fully uncovered until book three, THE TIME OF YESTERDAY'S RETURN.

That then is the psychological side of William's back story, but in THE SWIDGERS there's another sort of back story too. A Cosmic back story, for in THE SWIDGERS, the cosmos has its own origin story or creation myth. And that *mythos* is the subject of Echo's enigmatic late night tale on the Dungeness beach. And at the heart of that *mythos* (the Greek word for 'Story') is what Granny had been hinting at when, at her first meeting with William, she talked about Time itself being "out of joint".



So then, on that visit to Dungeness, and under a starry sky, Echo tells William the Swidger fable of The Universe and its Dream. The Universe, Echo says, was dreaming it was a real Universe and then suddenly woke up to find that it was. And that made it shake in fear:

‘One night, long ago, after a dog-weary day, perhaps on an evening such as this, the Universe was fast asleep. Dreaming. And what was its fantasy? It was dreaming it had become a real Universe. Oh, such happy thoughts. But then the Universe was shaken from its sleep. Something disturbing had frightened it. The Universe slowly began to open its eyes. ‘Oh my,’ it said, suddenly seeing the deep blackness of the night, ‘it was only meant to be a dream.’ The Universe then shuddered for that night sky was now as real as real can be. And cold. And lonely. And lost. Oh, if only it could go back to its dream, thought the Universe, it had been such a happy dream where all was good and pure and in its place. So that’s what the Universe tried to do. Remember its dream. But somehow it was always just out of reach. But, William Arthur, our Universe never gave up. It’s still hoping, one day, to dream its dream again. If Time will allow. And when it does, all will be well once more.

‘You see, that is what we are, young Swidger,’ Echo whispers to William, ‘the hope of a dream in a world, a sad world, that awoke too soon.’

Just a silly story, thinks William at first, but much later in the story, William comes to appreciate the importance of the Swidger

creation myth of The Universe and its Dream. The Swidgers very own Origin Story, if you will.

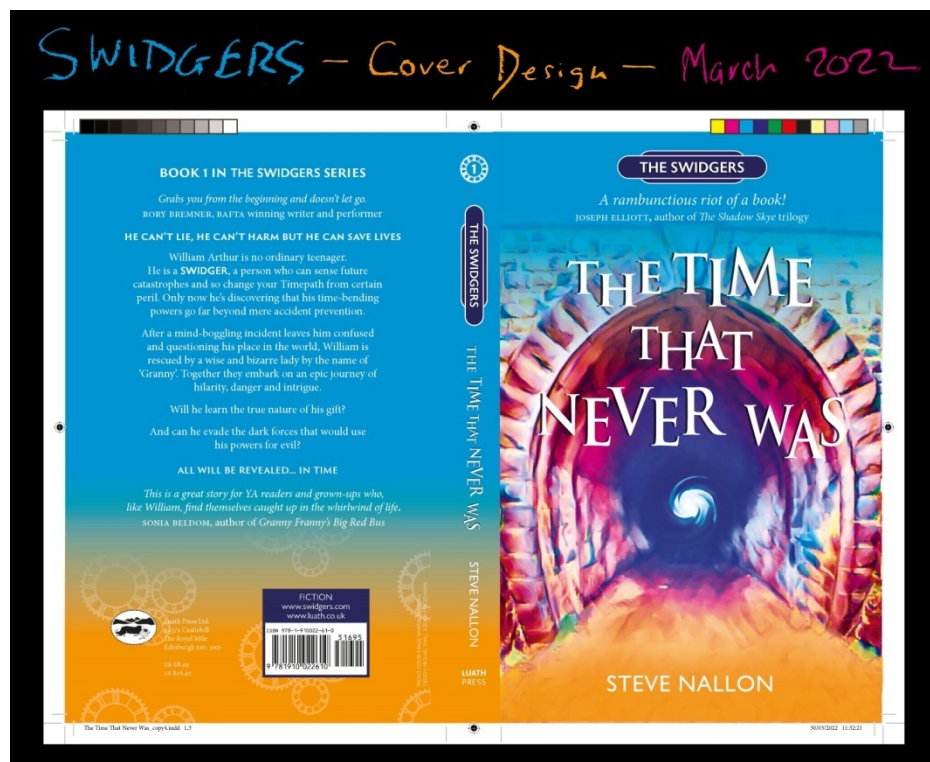
‘The Time is out of joint,’ she whispered, half to herself, her voice quivering. ‘A young prince once said that in an old story, cursing the world that he’d been born to set it right. But Swidgers,’ she added, her tone now more assured, ‘we don’t curse what we do, we relish it!’

The Time is out of joint.

I had no idea what it meant, yet the day would come when I did.

And never would I see the universe in the same way again.

From THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS



‘Once upon a time, in a faraway land, a young Prince lived in a shining castle. Although he had everything his heart desired, the Prince was spoiled, selfish, and unkind. But then, one winter’s night, an old beggar woman came to the castle and offered him a single rose in return for shelter from the bitter cold...’

The beginning of the Prologue from BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Prologue

Occasionally a prologue will tell you the back story, plus function as a great hook. This is the case in Disney’s BEAUTY AND THE BEAST, where the back story is told by an actual narrator who fills you in on the nature of the arrogant Prince and what brought about his magical transformation into the Beast. There are prologue back stories as well in the Warner Brothers gangster movie ANGELS WITH DIRTY FACES, the western RED RIVER, Hitchcock’s mystery thriller VERTIGO and the action movie CLIFFHANGER. All in their own way establish or explain the current situation and, in most cases, the psychological demons the character needs to overcome.

But a prologue can also be a useful way of establishing a character’s capability as well as their weaknesses. CHARIOTS OF FIRE, for example, shows in two early sequences the remarkable running speeds of both protagonists. Then there is the wedding scene in THE GODFATHER. Strictly speaking the wedding scene at the beginning of THE GODFATHER is more a first act than a prologue, but the point is that without it the audience would never know Michael has been a

soldier and a hero and without that knowledge we might question his capacity and capability to kill later on.

“All right, fellas. Let’s go and say a prayer for a boy who couldn’t run as fast as I could.”

Father Jerry in ANGELS WITH DIRTY FACES



ENHANCING THE TALE

Turning Points

“In the best fiction, plot is not a series of surprises but an increasingly moving series of recognitions, or moments of understanding.”

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

Turning Points

An unanticipated discovery. Recognition of someone's true nature where the person you thought was your ally is really your foe. Expecting something to one way, but getting the opposite. New information or disclosure that brings about surprise, curiosity or insight. All come under the general heading 'Turning Points'.

Sid Field happened to call these 'Pinch Points', and other terms that have been used by other story gurus include 'Focus Points' and 'Focal Points', but essentially they are all the same thing – a key development in the story which takes the tale in a new direction. Phrases associated with turning points are, “Well, I wasn't expecting that to happen!”, “What a turn-up for the book” plus “Ah! The double-cross!” In the theatre if the revelation or whatever it is comes

at the end of an act then that moment is known as the “And... curtain!” moment because it’s immediately after that line is said that the front cloth will fall.

Arguably every scene should have a turning point of some sort that pushes the story forward in a new way, be it negative or positive. But perhaps, as Stephen Jeffreys argues in his book *PLAYWRITING: STRUCTURE, CHARACTER, HOW AND WHAT TO WRITE*, turning point is too big an idea for it to occur in every single scene. “I prefer,” writes Jeffreys, “to use the idea that something has to change, which is for me less restrictive.”



Turning points essentially work as a sort of gear change. And in a story with rising action, a turning point always has to take the tale up a notch. More acute or rising, if you will. Turning points needn’t be restricted to a single moment. For example, in a sporting story, a turning point could be a montage sequence of transformation where across the edited sections someone goes from being slovenly to match fit. In such cases each short scene in the sequence may have an incremental improvement or change of some sort.

All that said, there are some people who regard turning points as contrivances or even gimmicks. Such moments are, such people argue, essentially the mechanics of plot – and when a plot is too mechanical the Story world and the characters within it become less believable. It's a fair point but, as ever with Story Craft, it is a matter of balance.

Some more thoughts on turning points...

“Concentrate your narrative energy on the point of change. This is especially important for historical fiction. When your character is new to a place, or things alter around them, that’s the point to step back and fill in the details of their world.”

Hilary Mantel

“All scenes proceed on the basis of action/reaction/action/reaction until the moment when they suddenly hit an unexpected reaction: the moment when one character achieves their goal and the other loses it. That’s what a turning point is.”

John Yorke, INTO THE WOODS

“The turning point in the process of growing up is when you discover the core of strength within you that survives all hurt.”

Max Lerner, American journalist, writer and educator

‘Why do thriller writers make the best lovers? Because they always put in a surprise twist at the end.’

A popular joke derived from the ‘The Best Lover’ format



HARRY: I came here tonight because when you realise you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible.

From WHEN HARRY MET SALLY, directed by Rob Reiner with screenplay by Nora Ephron

Character Insight

Turning points can involve, of course, a better understanding of character and the situation they are in. In THE CRYING GAME and PERSONAL SERVICES there are characters you thought were female who turn out to be male. In THE CRYING GAME in particular, the revelation that the lover has the body of a male not a female makes you rethink everything you have seen and understood so far. Or at least thought you understood. One of the most famous character insight turning points is in THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK when Luke's true identity comes to light. *Luke, I am your father* is what is usually put forward, but it's a slight misquote as Darth Vader's actual line is "No, I am your father."

A turning point can come from inside a character, too. Red's speech, for example, in THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION, where he seems to insult the parole board, results in his application being stamped for approved. That's certainly a plot turning point but it

comes from Red's new inner understanding of himself and the mistakes he made when he was younger.

RED: What do you really want to know? Am I sorry for what I did?

1967 PAROLE HEARINGS MAN: Well, are you?

RED: There's not a day goes by I don't feel regret. Not because I'm in here, because you think I should. I look back on the way I was then: a young, stupid kid who committed that terrible crime. I want to talk to him. I want to try to talk some sense to him, tell him the way things are. But I can't. That kid's long gone, and this old man is all that's left. I got to live with that.

From THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION, directed by Frank Darabont, with screenplay by Frank Darabont based on the Stephen King short novel RITA HAYWORTH AND THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION



“A change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune.”

Anagnorisis as defined by Aristotle in POETICS

Aristotle and Turning Points

Aristotle in POETICS divided plots into what he called ‘simple’ and ‘complex’. In simple plots there is a gradual reversal across the whole drama, whereas in complex plots there’s a sudden reversal of

the expected outcome, usually through recognition or discovery, and it's that which brings about the change in circumstances.

THE PERSIANS is a drama where it is slowly revealed that they, the Persians, have lost the war with the Athenians. It's more a mood drama than one with plot surprises and twists. And the history of drama may very well have been different had Aristotle lavished the same amount of praise on THE PERSIANS as he did on OEDIPUS REX, which is a play which has very distinct types of turning points.



In OEDIPUS REX, which is most definitely a complex plot in Aristotle's terms, there is a sudden revelation that completely changes the expected outcome. The technical terms here are *anagnorisis* (the change from ignorance to knowledge) and *peripeteia* (the unexpected turn to the opposite). The Messenger in OEDIPUS REX believes that he's bringing good news to Oedipus, but it's the opposite. What the Messenger tells Oedipus leads him to the understanding and knowledge of who he truly is – the son of the man he killed and the lover of his own mother. And it's a revelation

that results in Oedipus blinding himself, which in Greek thought, is a metaphor for inner death. And so the combination of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* result in a change of fortune that in Aristotle's theory of tragedy leads to a feeling of *catharsis* or pity and fear in the audience.



As a matter of fact, if you read or watch OEDIPUS REX the moments of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* are not quite as close together as Aristotle seems to suggest in POETICS. He's simply remembering it wrong, as we all sometimes do. Nevertheless, Aristotle's understanding of how the drama works is insightful and has been incredibly influential in the history of drama.

"A change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity."
***Peripeteia* as defined by Aristotle in POETICS**



MARTIN VAIL: *So there never... there never was a Roy?*
ROY: *Jesus Christ, Marty. If that's what you think, I am disappointed in you, I don't mind telling you. There never was an Aaron... counsellor! Come on, Marty! I thought you had it figured, there at the end. The way you put me on the stand like that?*

From **PRIMAL FEAR**, directed by Gregory Hoblit with screenplay by Steve Shagan and Ann Biderman based on the novel by William Dieh

From Ignorance to Knowledge

There is often a moment of realisation in a story when a character discovers that someone they thought they knew well is not what they seemed or said they were at all. A classic example of this is in Charles Dickens' **GREAT EXPECTATIONS** where Pip believed his benefactor to be Miss Havisham but it turns out to be the convict Magwitch. And most *Harry Potter* stories have a character who, at an important point in the plot, is revealed to be something other than they originally appeared. It turns out the twitching and stammering Professor Quirrell has been wearing a turban to conceal the fact that he allowed himself to be possessed by Voldemort. 'Mad-Eye' Moody is revealed to be Barty Crouch Jr., a Death Eater formerly presumed dead, Ron's rat Scabbers is really Peter Pettigrew and Tom Riddle is discovered to be Lord Voldemort, the Heir of Slytherin himself.

Then there's that oft repeated plot in court room dramas where the person the defence lawyer believes is innocent, and who they are trying to get acquitted, turns out to be guilty after all. It's a

story trope that you'll find in PRIMAL FEAR, THE MUSIC BOX, JAGGED EDGE and, to a degree, THE LAST VERMEER. And the move from ignorance to knowledge is all the more powerful dramatically if some sort of emotional attachment has developed between the accused and the defending lawyer. In THE MUSIC BOX (1989), that emotional relationship is between father and daughter, and in JAGGED EDGE (1985) the accused and the defence lawyer have become lovers. Both were successful movies, both essentially had the same big twist, and, perhaps not coincidentally, both were written by the same man, József (Joe) Eszterhás.

THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD (1963) by John le Carré, though it was written much earlier, could be said to be a variation on this big twist plot format in that in this Cold War drama the aggressive prosecuting lawyer turns out to be a spy himself, and even helps the defendant try to escape. A more recent working of this plot format might be said to be THE PALE BLUE EYE (2022), an American mystery thriller film written and directed by Scott Cooper, adapted from the 2003 novel of the same name by Louis Bayard.

THOMAS KRASNY: Don't you understand what he did? He did the identical crime eighteen months before he murdered his wife! He knew it would get him off the hook! He knew Bobby Slade was seeing his wife! That's why he did the first crime in Santa Cruz! He threw us Bobby Slade as a suspect! He picked that woman very carefully! He knew she played tennis with Slade! He planned this for

eighteen months! He is not a psychopath! He is a iceman. He is a monster.

From JAGGED EDGE, directed by Richard Marquand with screenplay by Joe Eszterhas



MAN: Ma, they're bringing Tom home.

MA: They are? When?

MAN: Right now. He's on his way.

MA: Is he all right?

MAN: He must be. They wouldn't be bringing him home.

MA: It's wonderful. I'll get his room ready. I knew my baby would come home.

From PUBLIC ENEMY directed by William A. Wellman and written by Kubec Glasmon, John Bright, and Harvey F. Thew

The Change to the Opposite of the Expected Outcome

The change to the opposite of the expected outcome can be an effective moment in drama from any era. In PUBLIC ENEMY, made in 1931, the mother of the kidnapped gangster Tom Powers (James Cagney) gets a phone call saying that her son is coming home and dances for joy when she hears a knock at the front door. Yet when she opens the door, yes it is her son and he's come home... but he's

wrapped in bandages and falls dead to the floor. Joy to despair in one moment. Even Sophocles never quite managed that.

And such a change to the opposite of the expected outcome is not limited to serious drama, for it can be an important element in comedy as well. There's a great scene in *WHEN HARRY MET SALLY* where Harry and Sally believe that each of their best friends would make perfect partners for the other. Sally's friend Marie for Harry, Harry's pal Jess for Sally. But on a double date, it's Jess and Marie who immediately hit it off in seconds. A most definite opposite to expected outcome.



There's an opposite outcome to that which was expected early in *HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE*. Harry Potter thinks he's in trouble after his first experience on a broomstick: 'Now he'd done it. He hadn't last two weeks. He'd be packing his bags in ten minutes.' Harry is marched away by Professor McGonagall, but instead of being expelled, he's taken to meet fellow student Oliver Wood. McGonagall then tells Wood, "I've found you a Seeker. The boy's a natural. I've never seen anything like it." From being expelled

to potential Quidditch hero. It's a great turnaround but one that works so well dramatically precisely because it's so totally unexpected.

In HAMLET there's a famous turnabout to the opposite when Polonius is caught in his own trap. As Hamlet remarks, "'tis the sport to have the engineer / Hoist with his own petard", meaning 'blown up with his own bomb'. Polonius has hidden himself behind a curtain expecting to hear something to his advantage, only Hamlet notices a slight kerfuffle behind the arras and so stabs the figure, believing Polonius to be the King. Unexpected outcomes all round, but the worst is for poor Polonius who ends up slain. And to become 'hoist by your own petard' has become a well used turning point in many stories over the years. In Disney's PETE'S DRAGON, Dr Terminus (Jim Dale) gets his foot trapped in a rope tied to a harpoon he meant for the dragon. In the action thriller THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER, the torpedo launched to destroy the deserting Russian submarine ends up blowing the very submarine that sent it. Irony, therefore, becomes a key aspect of any blown-up-by-your-own-bomb turning point.

***HAMLET: There's letters seal'd: and my two schoolfellows,
Whom I will trust as I will adders fang'd,
They bear the mandate; they must sweep my way,
And marshal me to knavery. Let it work;
For 'tis the sport to have the engineer***

***Hoist with his own petard: and 't shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines,
And blow them at the moon: O, 'tis most sweet,
When in one line two crafts directly meet.
This man shall set me packing:
I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room.
From William Shakespeare's HAMLET***



***HARRY ANGEL: [sobbing] I know who I am!
LOUIS CYPHERE: That's it Johnny... take a good look... No matter
how cleverly you sneak up on a mirror, your reflection always looks
you straight in the eye.
HARRY ANGEL: [seeing his reflection] I know who I am! I know who
I AM!
From ANGEL HEART, directed and written by Alan Parker, based on
the novel FALLING ANGEL William Hjortsberg***

Irony and Turning Points

Ironical turning points can be especially effective dramatically. Oedipus, of course, famously sets out to find the cause of the plague in Thebes and discovers it is himself. OEDIPUS REX is arguably drama's first whodunit. And ANGEL HEART is a modern detective story where the detective is tasked with finding someone who turns out to be himself. In fact many turning points involve an ironic inverse. In Disney's ALADDIN, for example, the villain does indeed

get to become a genie, but he doesn't realise that will also mean he will have to live inside that bottle. From absolute power to complete entrapment in the same action.

The twist in *THE CABINET OF DR CALIGARI* is that the man telling his story in flashback, Francis, turns out to be an inmate of a mental asylum. A modern movie that uses a similar ironic twist is *SHUTTER ISLAND*. And both, of course, are examples of an unreliable narrator within the narrative itself.

JAFAR: The universe is mine to command! To control!

ALADDIN: Not so fast, Jafar! Aren't you forgetting something?

JAFAR: Huh?

ALADDIN: You wanted to be a genie? You got it!

[cufflinks form on Jafar's wrists]

JAFAR: What?

ALADDIN: And everything that goes with it.

[Aladdin holds up a black genie lamp, which then sucks Jafar into it]

JAFAR: No! No!

From *ALADDIN*, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, with original screenplay by Ron Clements, John Musker and Ted Elliott



FRANCIS: You all think I'm insane-! it isn't true - it's the director who's insane! - He is Caligari... Caligari... Caligari!
From THE CABINET OF DR CALIGARI, directed by Robert Wiene and written by Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz

Reversing the Reversal

Reversing the reversal is what happens when what you thought was the reversal is itself then reversed. The biggest cliché here is that moment in a story when what you have been reading or watching turns out to have been all a dream. But often that dream is then itself reversed. What often happens is that the person waking up from sleep enters what they think is their waking reality, only then they suddenly wake up again, for that supposed reality also turns out to have been a dream. You'll find plot moments like this in movies such as THE FLY, DEAD OF NIGHT, DEVIL'S ADVOCATE, and BRAZIL. And of course, the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series uses this trick *ad infinitum*.

Sometimes though reversing the reversal is just an extra twist, or the more specifically the real twist. Verbal in THE USUAL SUSPECTS refuses to accept the guilt of Keaton, only then he admits he was wrong: "It was all Keaton. Keaton was Keyser Söze." You think you now know it all but then comes the true twist reversing that reversal. In THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ALICE CREED there are so many twists, double-crosses and reversing of the reversals that it's sometimes hard to keep up. And although there are unexpected, THE

DISAPPEARANCE OF ALICE CREED could be said to be an example of a movie where the twists, though well plotted, raise questions over character credibility and consistency.

A word here about apparent defeat followed by unexpected victory, which is a variation on reversing the reversal. Apparent defeat to unexpected victory is popular in sports stories. For example, early in the movie CINDERELLA MAN the boxer James J. Braddock spots a flaw in his opponent, Max Baer, but he knows he has to be near defeat to use it. And when he does, it floors Baer and so from seeming defeat Max Baer finds victory. It's a moment which turns on a sixpence and is more powerful because of that.



A *Cinderella* story with an apparent defeat followed by an unexpected victory can be found in MRS. HARRIS GOES TO PARIS. The prized dress Mrs Harris bought in Paris is accidentally burnt (apparent defeat) when it is lent out to a friend. But as it was a Christian Dior gown, the story of the burning dress is featured in the newspapers and images even reach Paris. It's after reading this news item in the Paris press, the Dior team decide to send to Mrs. Harris

the dress she always truly wanted (unexpected victory). And this she wears at the local dance, where she wins her 'prince'. It's a fine example of William Goldman's famous adage, "Give the audience what they want, but not in the way they expect it."

VERBAL: *After that my guess is that you will never hear from him again. The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he did not exist. And like that... he is gone."*

THE USUAL SUSPECTS (1995) was directed by Bryan Singer with a screenplay by Christopher McQuarrie



"Someone in this camp ain't what he appears to be."

MacReady in THE THING (1982), directed by John Carpenter with screenplay by Bill Lancaster based on a story by John W. Campbell Jr.

Means and Ways of Recognition

The recognition of someone's true nature or identity can be done in many ways – by tokens, by declaration (with or without motivation), by memory and recall, and by deduction or inference. Tokens are the most used, but arguably, as Aristotle points out in *POETICS*, the least artistic. Tokens can range from the congenital, meaning something that was there from birth, to the acquired, for

example, a scar or something more external such as jewellery, as in the Hitchcock movie VERTIGO.

Recognition from memory works well when that which triggers memory has been set up before hand or is there in plain sight. An example of this is in RAIN MAN where the Tom Cruise character, Charlie Babbitt, realises his childhood friend 'Raymond' was really 'Rain Man', who he'd thought for most of his adult life was an imaginary character.



Recognition through deduction is often the most dramatically rewarding, and is, of course, essentially the action of the detective story or mystery thriller. For example, Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart), the private eye in THE MALTESE FALCON, works out late on in the movie that it was the *femme fatale*, Brigid O'Shaughnessy (Mary Astor), who killed his partner Miles Archer:

Miles hadn't many brains, but he had too many years of experience as a detective to be caught like that, by a man he was shadowing, up a blind alley, with his gun tucked away in his hip and his overcoat buttoned. But he would have gone up there with you, Angel. He was just dumb enough for that.

He'd have looked you up and down and licked his lips and gone, grinning from ear to ear.

Sometimes recognition can happen when characters give themselves away. In *THE GODFATHER II*, Fredo at the sex show pretends he's never met Johnny Ola, Hyman Roth's right-hand man, but it's clear from his remarks later on that he has met him before and, Michael then realises, was the traitor who betrayed the family – "I know it was you, Fredo. You broke my heart. You broke my heart!" In *THE ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD* (1938) it's his own vanity that essentially gives away the identity of the disguised hero. Robin Hood (Errol Flynn), masquerading as someone else, can't stop himself from showing off and being the best in the archery competition. And it's from this action that the Sheriff works out the man could be no one but Robin Hood.



The key for any plot turning point where there is a recognition of someone's true nature or identity is that the method of revealing should ideally be original. That's certainly the case in the alien

suspense thriller THE THING. MacReady (Kurt Russell) has worked out that the creature does not like high temperatures and that this is likely to be the case for every cell in its makeup:

MACREADY: We're gonna draw a little bit of everybody's blood... 'cause we're gonna find out who's The Thing. Watchin' Norris in there gave me the idea that... maybe every part of him was a whole, every little piece was an individual animal with a built-in desire to protect its own life. Ya see, when a man bleeds, it's just tissue, but blood from one of you Things won't obey when it's attacked. It'll try and survive... crawl away from a hot needle, say.

Well, there is someone in the group who is The Thing. And the hot needle on their blood sample is a great scene, with much suspense and ultimately horror and terror.

SMILER GROGAN: Look, there's this dough see. There's all this dough. Three hundred and fifty G's! Do you hear what I'm saying? Three hundred and fifty G's! In the park. Rosita. Rosita Beach State Park. Just south of Daygo in Santa Rosita. It's in this box, buried under this... [coughing] this... buried under this big W. You'll see it! You'll see it under this big W. You can't miss it! A big, big, W! And it's been there. And it's been laying there for fifteen years!
From IT'S A MAD MAD MAD MAD WORLD, directed by Stanley Kramer and written by William Rose and Tania Rose



“The butler did it!”

Not from Mary Roberts Rinehart’s 1930 novel, THE DOOR, but often associated with it as the butler in that plot indeed did do it!

‘The Big Twist’

Sometimes the twist at the end is the best thing about certain stories. Or at least the most memorable. Think THE SIXTH SENSE, THE MOUSETRAP, MEMENTO, THE AWAKENING, THE OTHERS, BEAUTIFUL MIND, THE PLANET OF THE APES, THE STING, THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PYJAMAS, THE CABIN IN THE WOODS, THE ORPHAN, GONE GIRL, ANGEL HEART, SEVEN, SHUTTER ISLAND, THE PRESTIGE, FROM DUSK TILL DAWN... and many more. If you know the tale, you’ll know the twist and why it has been included here.

GEORGE TAYLOR: Oh my God. I’m back. I’m home. All the time, it was... We finally really did it. You maniacs! You blew it up! Ah, damn you! God damn you all to hell!

From THE PLANET OF THE APES, directed by Franklin J. Schaffner, with screenplay by Michael Wilson and Rod Serling, based on the novel by Pierre Boulle



ENHANCING THE TALE

The Ticking Clock

“Go to the woods and bring me back

One: the cow as white as milk,

Two: the cape as red as blood,

Three: the hair as yellow as corn,

Four: the slipper as pure as gold.

Bring me these

Before the chime

Of midnight,

In three days time,

And you shall have,

I guarantee,

A child as perfect

As child can be.”

**The Witch in Stephen Sondheim’s and James Lapine’s INTO THE
WOODS**

The Ticking Clock

A deadline. A time lock. A bomb. A literal ticking clock. All add time pressure to a story. Phrases associated with the ‘ticking clock’ include “It’s become a race against time!” “Time is running out!” and, if successful, “Well, we made it in the nick of time!”

Clocks and deadlines in stories can come in many different forms and with many different timings. In fairy stories such as *Cinderella*, midnight is the classic deadline, whereas in *Beauty and the Beast* it is when the last petal falls from the enchanted rose. The *Sleeping Beauty* myth also has a clock of sorts and that is the prick of the finger. A clock or specific time or time limit can also feature in the title of a tale itself, for example, HIGH NOON, 48 HOURS, THE NEXT THREE DAYS, CLOCKWISE and DINNER AT EIGHT.

KANE: You know I've only got an hour and I've got lots to do. Stay at the hotel until it's over.

AMY: No, I won't be here when it's over. You're asking me to wait an hour to find out if I'm going to be a wife or a widow. I say it's too long to wait. I won't do it...I mean it. If you won't go with me now, I'll be on that train when it leaves here.

KANE: I've got to stay.

From HIGH NOON, directed by Fred Zinnemann and screenplay by Carl Foreman



"And so I told myself to take that one. Because Father said clocks slay time. He said time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life. The

***hands were extended, slightly off the horizontal at a faint angle,
like a gull tilting into the wind."***

William Faulkner, THE SOUND AND THE FURY

Literal Clocks

Stories often feature literal clocks. Indeed 'The Clock' can often become part of the image system of the story. The classic example of this is HIGH NOON. The plot of HIGH NOON is simple enough.

Marshal Will Kane is preparing to retire and plans to depart that day for a fresh start in life with his new bride. However, a vicious outlaw Frank Miller, whom Kane sent to prison, has now been released and will soon arrive on the noon train. And the outlaw's gang will be there to meet him – seeking revenge. Should Marshal Kane leave with his new wife or stay and do his duty?



The noon train is the deadline but clocks feature pretty much everywhere in the town. There's a clock in the barber's shop, a clock at the train station, a clock in the wedding area, in Mrs Rameriz hotel room, in the hotel reception, in the Rameriz' saloon, in Sam Fuller's

house and there's even a painted clock used as the sign for watch repairs. The movie is in real time (or thereabouts) and so the clocks operate as a practical way of showing the approach of noon as well as being part of the image system.

BACK TO THE FUTURE, not surprisingly as it's a time travel movie, also uses a clock motif in its *mise-en-scène*. Clocks dominate in the film's opening credits, and there's even one featuring the silent movie actor Harold Lloyd hanging off the big hand pointing to eleven o'clock, which foreshadows what actually happens to Doc on the clock tower towards the end of the lightening action sequence. And it was the Doc Brown trying to hang a clock in his toilet back in November 1955 which led to Doc coming up with the idea of the flux capacitor. And on the movie poster for BACK TO THE FUTURE, which became one of the iconic images of 1985, you can see Doc Brown wearing two watches and Marty staring at his watch.

Bombs in action movies tend to have an actual clock mechanism as part of how they are made. In real life there would probably be no need for them to be that big or visual, but, well, they need to be for the tick-down shot. Usually the time clicks away right to the last second, but in GOLDFINGER (1964), although the bomb countdown clock was filmed to stop at 0:03, a sharp-eyed editor with a sense of humour stopped at '0:07', which still gets a big laugh from audiences. The sharp eared might notice that James Bond does actually say, "Three more ticks and Mr. Goldfinger would've hit the

jackpot,” but the visual edit with the stopping of the mechanism at ‘007’ was nevertheless kept in.



In J.M. Barrie’s PETER PAN, there is an odd ‘clock’ in the form of the ticking crocodile. The crocodile once swallowed a clock but its tick proves useful because when you hear it you know its jaws are close and so can escape. But there’ll come a time when that crocodile will become dangerous:

Hook barked petulantly. “I want Peter Pan, who first gave the brute its taste for me.” He sat down on a large mushroom, and now there was a quiver in his voice. “Smee,” he said huskily, “that crocodile would have had me before this, but by a lucky chance it swallowed a clock which goes tick tick inside it, and so before it can reach me I hear the tick and bolt.” He laughed, but in a hollow way. “Some day,” said Smee, “the clock will run down, and then he’ll get you.” Hook wetted his dry lips. “Ay,” he said, “that’s the fear that haunts me.”

In the back story it was of course Peter who fed the crocodile Hook’s arm. In the plot, the crocodile gets his fill not when the clock runs down, but when Peter gives Hook a final shove. Even so, it

doesn't take a genius to realise that the ticking clock and the crocodile are seen by Hook as Time's agent of death itself.

“Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.”

Charles Dickens, DAVID COPPERFIELD



GARE DE LEON.

There is a hectic, fevered excitement evident in the faces we pass. This is the last train from Paris! The CAMERA STOPS on Rick, who is glancing at his watch, then up at the clock. It is two minutes before train time. Rain is pouring over his head and shoulders, but he seems not to notice. Suddenly Sam appears with an envelope clasped in his hand.

RICK: Where is she? Have you seen her?

SAM: No, Mr Richard. I can't find her. She done checked out of the hotel, Boss. But this here note came just after you left.

Rick grabs the letter. He fumbles as he tries to open it. The envelope fights him. At this moment the train pulls into the station. There is a hub-bub among the crowd. Finally Rick gets the envelope open, stares down at the letter – it reads:

‘Richard: I cannot go with you or ever see you again. You must not ask why. Just believe me that I love you. Go, my darling, and God bless you.’

From CASABLANCA, with screenplay by Julius and Philip Epstein, and based on EVERYBODY COMES TO RICK’S, an unproduced stage play by Murray Burnett and Joan Alison. Director Michael Curtis

Trains

The high noon train famously acts as ‘The Clock’ in HIGH NOON, but trains and the need to catch them – or indeed avoid them – operate as time deadlines in many stories. In THE PERILS OF PAULINE poor Pauline often found herself being tied to a railway track awaiting the dastardly fate of an on-coming train – but would she be released in time?

Many plots then use the departure of a train as the story’s ‘clock’. In CASABLANCA there’s the last train from Paris that Rick must catch, and in BRIEF ENCOUNTER, set in a railway platform tearoom, there’s Dr Harvey’s final meeting with Laura before the train comes that will take him away forever. Then there’s the steam locomotive in BACK TO THE FUTURE III that will hopefully take Marty back to where he belongs in 1985. Trains and timetables also feature in CLOCKWISE, THE THIRD MAN, DOUBLE INDEMNITY and VON RYAN’S EXPRESS. But it’s not just movie thrillers that use trains and their schedules to add time pressure to the plot. Don’t forget that soon to depart train in the last act of Chekhov’s THE CHERRY ORCHARD which puts a time limit on the leaving party.

***“The first step to knowing who we are... is knowing where we are
and... when we are.”***

**Brian Stimpson (John Cleese) in CLOCKWISE written by
Michael Frayn and directed by Christopher Morahan**



***“Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
In the days of auld lang syne?
For auld lang syne, my dear,
For auld lang syne,
We’ll tak’ a cup o’kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.”
Auld Lang Syne, Traditional***

New Year’s Eve

New Year’s Eve usually functions in stories more as a time of psychological transition than an actual deadline. Think of all those New Year’s Eves where people make resolutions in the hope of becoming someone other than they are. An obvious example is BRIDGET JONES’S DIARY. The countdown to the strike of midnight as one year ends and another begins often offers a tale a great story moment. It’s as midnight strikes, for example, that the ship is

overturned by a gigantic wave in *THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE*. And it's on New Year's Eve and in a snow storm in the action movie *ASSAULT ON PRECINCT 13* (2005) that a prison transport vehicle carrying a crime boss is diverted to Precinct 13 – and as a result an unprepared and skeleton staff suddenly face attack from the crime boss's gang.

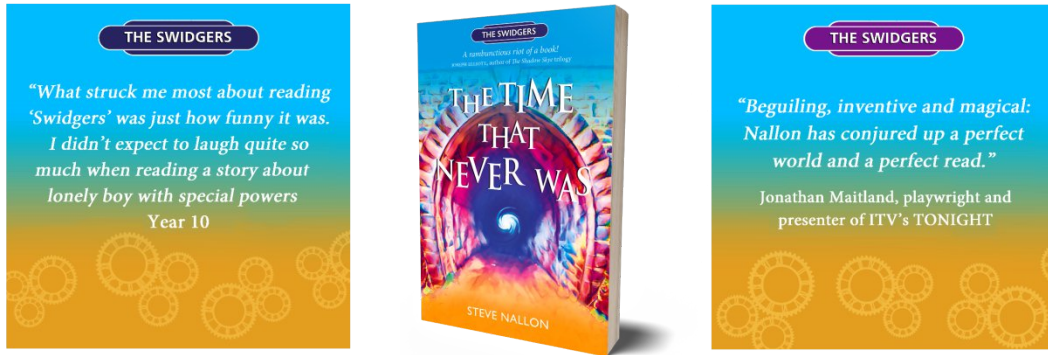
Structurally, New Year's Eve often acts as a marker in time that allows a writer to explore 'before' and 'after'. It's there in *BOOGIE NIGHTS*, where the 70s has been a great decade for the adult movie industry but New Year's Eve 1979 heralds in the 80s which will prove to be painful and destructive, especially after one of the characters shoots themselves. And there's a before-and-after conceit in Woody Allen's *RADIO DAYS*, where the stars of radio drama celebrate New Year not knowing due to television that their futures and their status are about to change. Another new year plot point can be found in *WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING*, where Peter wakes up from his concussion after New Year's Eve not knowing who Lucy is and believing he has amnesia. In Noël Coward's *CAVALCADE*, which begins and ends on New Year's Eves in 1899 and 1929, New Year is used more as a framing device, but the sense of a new world to come on the eve of a new century is very much part of the theme of the drama.

New Year's Eve is a time too where love and lust, unrequited or mutually enjoyed, is suddenly thrown sharply into focus. And in such

moments passions can become heightened. There's the attempted suicide by Norma Desmond on New Year's Eve in *SUNSET BLVD.* which forces Joe to return to her, and it's on New Year's Eve in *CINEMA PARADISO* that Toto waits to no avail outside of the house for the girl he loves. It's at a party on New Year's Eve with his rugby teammates that John punches his gay lover (and fellow teammate), essentially bringing an end to their relationship. On a more cheerful note, in *WHEN HARRY MET SALLY* (1989) it's on New Year's Eve that the two lovers realise they are meant for each other, and in *CAROL* (2015) it's on New Year's Eve that Carol and Therese kiss for the first time .



There's a curious time tale movie called *REPEAT PERFORMANCE* (1947) where Sheila Page kills her husband on New Year's Eve but then wishes she could relive 1946 and so avoid the mistakes that led to his death. Things do change in her relived life, but her husband is still killed, only under different circumstances. The film was remade as *TURN BACK THE CLOCK* in 1989. Not that remaking it changed the outcome then, either.



The joys and celebrations of a New Year's Eve celebration often act as contrasting backdrop to personal sorrow or tragedy. In *SHOWBOAT*, it's on New Year's Eve where Julie is forced to give up her job, and in *THE GODFATHER PART II* it's at a New Year party that Michael confronts his brother Fredo with the knowledge that it was Fredo who betrayed the family. *SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE* (1993), *LOOKING FOR MR. GOODBAR* (1977) and *PETER'S FRIENDS* (1992) also all use New Year's Eve, at least in part, as a backdrop to their stories.

"We will open the book. Its pages are blank. We are going to put words on them ourselves. The book is called 'Opportunity' and its first chapter is New Year's Day.

Edith Lovejoy Pierce



“Pity about poor Catherine, though. Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock.”

Hannibal Lecter in SILENCE OF THE LAMBS, directed by Jonathan Demme and written by Ted Tally, adapted from Thomas Harris’s 1988 novel

Deadlines

In THE USUAL SUSPECTS there are two deadlines. The first is the two hour bail that has been posted for Roger ‘Verbal’ Kint, and the second is the Hungarian who survived the fire on the boat and the police artist drawing from his description a picture of ‘Keyser Söze’. If the police get the image in time, they will realise that Keyser Söze and Roger ‘Verbal’ Kint are one and the same person, but if the two hour bail runs out, then Kint will be free. There are two clocks as well in BIG. There is the planning meeting deadline and then there is the departure of the fair – and Josh has the dilemma that he must choose between the two.

Action adventures tend to have a series of deadlines and clocks all through the story. This is certainly true for such movies as THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER and INDEPENDENCE DAY, which both feature either planes or helicopters that are on a deadline, plus missiles or torpedoes that must hit their target within a certain time limit. And you’ll find such clocks and deadlines throughout the novels of Alistair MacLean and Andy McNab.

The purpose of a deadline or time limit is to put extra pressure on the protagonists – and most stories have them in one form or another. In *FIELD OF DREAMS* it's the bank's repossession of the farm, in *TOY STORY* it's Andy's parents leaving the family home, in *THE SOUND OF MUSIC* it's the Captain's summons to take his place in the navy and in *IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE* it's the close of business when there's a run on the bank and in the climatic action the arrival of the bank auditor. And of course there clocks and deadlines in Shakespeare – *MACBETH*: My dearest love, / Duncan comes here to-night. / *LADY MACBETH*: And when goes hence? / *MACBETH*: Tomorrow, as he purposes. / *LADY MACBETH*: O, never / Shall sun that morrow see!

One of the most curious 'clocks' in a movie can be found in Orson Welles' *F FOR FAKE*. This documentary film opens with Welles performing some magic tricks for children. Welles then quotes the French nineteenth century watchmaker and magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin who said that a magician was really just an actor. Welles then promises that for the next hour everything he says in the film will be based on fact. And Welles keeps his word, except the film goes on longer than an hour. But people in cinemas rarely check the minute hand on their watches when a movie starts and so in *F FOR FAKE* audiences who trusted Welles ended up being fooled into believing some things to be true when they are not. A great trick in its own way – and that timed hour played a key part. Another curious

deadline in a movie has to be Maude's eightieth birthday in *HAROLD AND MAUDE*, which is the time she believes she should say goodbye to the world, and her lover, the teenage Harold.

Occasionally in stories the deadline is past. In *THE DRESSER*, for example, the train is missed. Well, until the leading actor shouts out very loudly "Stop the train!" In *THE LITTLE MERMAID*, the sun setting is the deadline and this is past. What this means is that the prince must now find way to kill the all-powerful and ever growing Ursula – which he does with the pointing prow of his ship. Another deadline that is missed is in *THE GRADUATE*. Ben must get to Elaine before her marriage has taken place, but he's too late. But no matter, the recently married Elaine sees Ben and when she does she runs off with him anyway. And they as they sit together at the back of a bus, she in her wedding dress, and he with his coat on, they do so to the sound of silence. *Cue song.*



In *JURASSIC PARK* there is a scene where the children are climbing over a fence that is not electrified, except back at base there's a team trying to get the electricity working again. In fact, the

boy is still on the fence when it becomes electrified, but the shock only bounces him off it rather than killing him. That said, his hair does now stand on end.

It's rare in a movie to have a story with no deadline at all, but the time looping *GROUNDHOG DAY*, with a day that repeats itself for decades, is an example of sorts. Yes, it's a day that does come to an end, but as soon as it does, it starts all over again. *WINGS OF DESIRE* on the other hand features a wandering angel with no time limit at all, though he later chooses to become human after meeting Peter Falk, who, in the story, is revealed to have been an angel once himself.



Some more thoughts on clocks and deadlines....

“The opening of *ABSURD PERSON SINGULAR* gets it about right, I’ve found, when Sidney and Jane anxiously await their important guests and he continually consults the invisible fourth-wall kitchen clock. A remorseless countdown is set in motion as the minutes tick by. But they’re not our minutes. They’re stage minutes.”

Alan Ayckbourn in *THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING*

“Don’t watch the clock; do what it does. Keep going.”

Sam Levenson

“I love deadlines. I like the whooshing noise they make as they go by.

Douglas Adams, author

“Everything is an experiment until it has a deadline. That gives it a destination, context, and a reason.

Brian Eno

“A dream is just a dream. A goal is a dream with a plan and a deadline.”

Harvey Mackay

“Live your life by a compass, not a clock.”

Stephen Covey

“Clock time is our bank manager, tax collector, police inspector; this inner time is our wife.”

J.B. Priestly, in the novel MAN AND TIME, an epigram which in part is said to have inspired Audrey Niffenegger’s THE TIME TRAVELER’S WIFE

***“Somewhat back from the village street
Stands the old-fashioned country-seat.***

Across its antique portico

Tall poplar-trees their Shadows throw;

And from its station in the hall

An ancient timepiece says it all, –

‘Forever – never!

Never – forever!’”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, in his poem THE OLD CLOCK ON THE STAIRS

"The hours of folly are measured by the clock; but of wisdom, no clock can measure."

William Blake

"They took away time, and they gave us the clock."

Abdullah Ibrahim

"No clock is more regular than the belly."

Francois Rabelais

"Every so often, we all gaze into the abyss. It's a depressing fact of life that eventually the clock expires; eventually the sand in the hourglass runs out. It's the leaving behind of everything that matters to us that hurts the most."

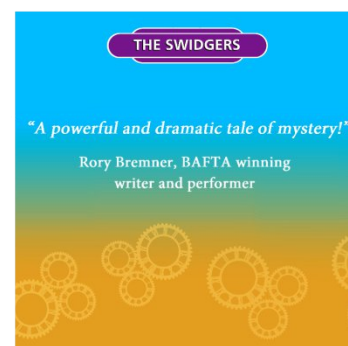
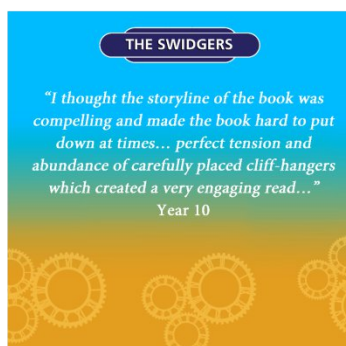
Ben Shapiro

"The death clock is ticking slowly in our breast, and each drop of blood measures its time, and our life is a lingering fever."

Georg Buchner

"Time management is an oxymoron. Time is beyond our control, and the clock keeps ticking regardless of how we lead our lives."

John C. Maxwell



"It was when I stood before her, avoiding her eyes, that I took note of the surrounding objects in detail, and saw that her watch had stopped at twenty minutes to nine, and that the clock in the room had stopped at twenty minutes to nine. 'Look at me,' said Miss Havisham. 'You are not afraid of a woman who has never seen the sun since you were born?'"

...

I was beginning to remind her that today was Wednesday, when she checked me with her former impatient movement of the fingers of her right hand.

'There, there! I know nothing of the days of the week; I know nothing of the weeks of the year.'

...

So unchanging was the dull old house, the yellow light in the darkened room, the faded spectre in the chair by the dressing-table glass, that I felt as if the stopping of the clocks had stopped Time in that mysterious place, and, while I and everything else outside it grew older, it stood still."

From GREAT EXPECTATIONS by Charles Dickens

"Even a stopped clock is right twice a day."

Joseph Addison

'I pray you, what is 't o'clock?'

'You should ask me what time o'day. There's no clock in the forest.'

Rosalind as Ganymede to Orlando in William Shakespeare's AS YOU

LIKE IT

"An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length."

Virginia Woolf, English novelist

"The mind of man is like a clock that is always running down, and requires to be constantly wound up."

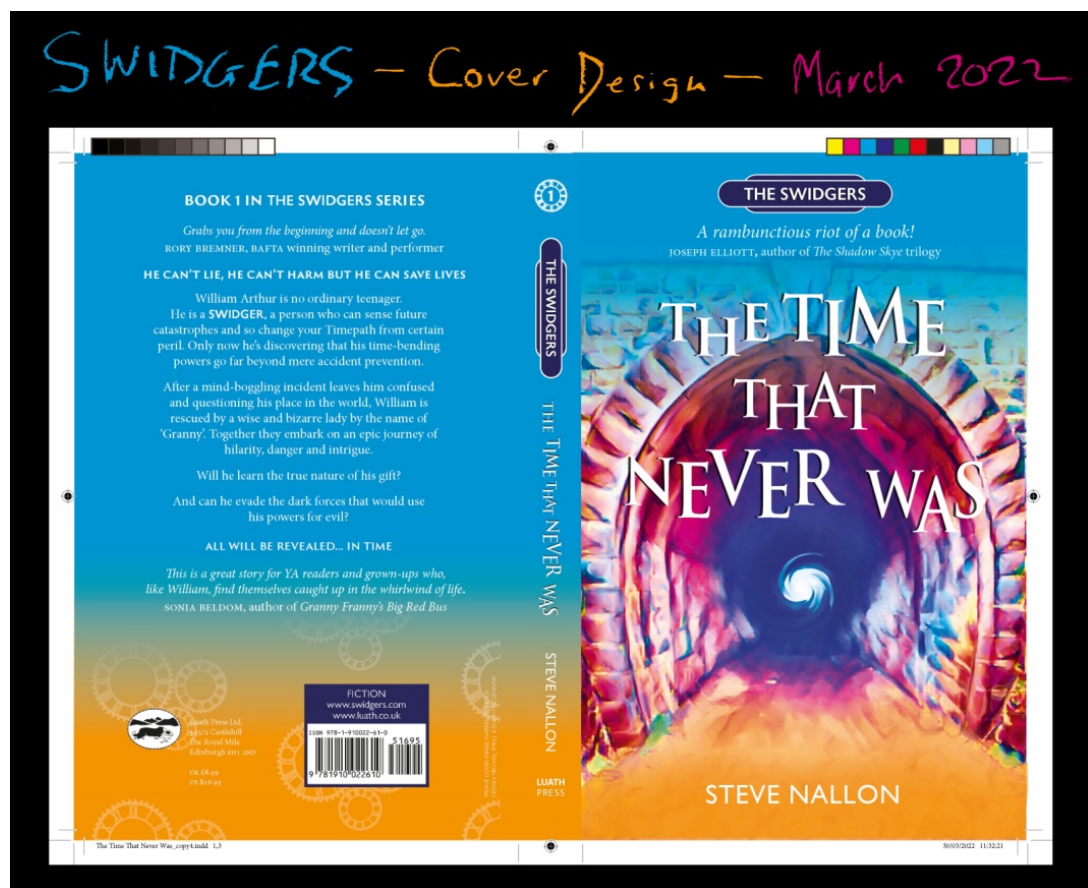
William Hazlitt, writer and essayist

"I open with a clock striking, to beget an awful attention in the audience - it also marks the time, which is four o'clock in the morning, and saves a description of the rising sun, and a great deal about gilding the eastern hemisphere."

Richard Brinsley Sheridan

"I must govern the clock, not be governed by it."

Golda Meir, Israeli politician



ENHANCING THE TALE

Sub-plots: Types and Functions

“Subplots bring realism to your main plot simply by existing – by interrupting the flow. Why is this? Because life doesn’t move forward all at once. Interruptions happen, change rushes in, we juggle three or ten balls at once. Readers don’t expect continuous narratives.”

Elizabeth Sims, American writer, journalist, and contributing editor at WRITER’S DIGEST magazine

The Relationships between Sub-plots and the Main Plots

A sub-plot is structurally no different from the main plot in that, like any plot, it has an inciting incident and an action that drives it along in causally linked events. And of course a sub-plot, as with a main plot, can be deconstructed and then reconstructed by taking all the events that occur and putting them in chronological order. A main plot and a sub-plot then may differ in substance, but not in principle. However, there lies the problem, because if there’s too little substance, the sub-plot will get lost, but if there’s too much, and it may become too dominant and overshadow the main plot. A

sub-plot is a failure if it is not interesting enough, where the reader or audience is left longing to get back to the main plot, or it fails because it is fascinating there is wish for more of it and less of the main action. What matters then is always the balance between the sub-plot and the main plot and so perhaps one way of seeing the relationship between the two is to think musically and consider the main plot, the A plot, as the melody line, and the sub-plot, the B plot, as the accompanying harmony.

In discussing the differences between 'plot' and 'story', a distinction was made between those events directly presented and those events which are reported or happen off stage. Usually in a main plot nearly all events are directly presented. Indeed, the inciting incident, which triggers the action, and the climax, which brings that action to a close, are obligatory scenes. However, this is not necessarily the case with a sub-plot, which, by its nature, is given less time or coverage than the main plot. Inevitably this restriction means that many of the events of the sub-plot are sometimes reported rather than directly presented. It's often the case as well, especially with stage or screen sub-plots where time is a major issue, that much is left for the audience to infer or figure out for themselves. It is also likely that any back story to the sub-plot, if it is mentioned or exists at all, will again be different in substance to the main plot. In *THE WIZARD OF OZ*, for example, we only get a few

lines to explain why the Tin Man is all rusted, how the Scarecrow lost some of his stuffing and why the lion has no courage.

“If God is an author and the universe is the biggest novel ever written, I may feel as if I’m the lead character in the story, but like every man and woman on Earth, I am a supporting player in one of billions of sub-plots. You know what happens to supporting players. Too often they are killed off in chapter three, or in chapter ten, or in chapter thirty-five. A supporting player always has to be looking over his shoulder.”

Dean Ray Koontz, American author, whose novels are often described as suspense thrillers, but also incorporate elements of horror, fantasy, science fiction, mystery, and satire



“The romance is the primary plot in a story that has two plots. The second plot is not a subplot, but one that is interwoven with the romance plot (if that makes sense.) A story needs compelling characters in a compelling plot.”

Madeline Hunter, American author of romance novels

The Different Types of Sub-plots and their Functions

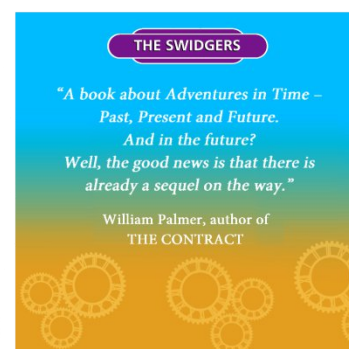
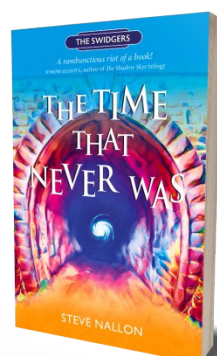
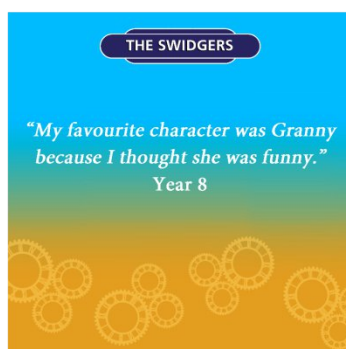
A sub-plot can be complementary, which is to say that it in some ways echoes the main plot. An example of this is the Duke of Gloucester sub-plot in KING LEAR, where Gloucester, like Lear,

misjudges his children with fateful consequences. On the other hand, sub-plots can offer a contrast to the main plot. In *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*, for example, there is a love story sub-plot involving Shylock's daughter Jessica and Lorenzo, friend of the merchant Antonio. The love story can be seen as a welcome diversion from the 'pound of flesh' plot, yet, because Lorenzo is mates with Antonio and Jessica is related to Shylock, to a degree at least, this love plot does complicate the main action. A sub-plot can also act as a thematic contradiction to the main plot. For example, in *HAMLET*, Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, is clearly a man of action who doesn't delay or think too much about consequences. Unlike, of course, the play's protagonist the Prince of Denmark.



In musical theatre, the sub-plot tends to function either as comic relief to the more serious main plot – as in *OKLAHOMA* and *GUYS AND DOLLS* – or as a tragic B plot to the A plot – as in *THE KING AND I* and *SOUTH PACIFIC*, where both B plots involve the death of the male lover. And in the case of *SOUTH PACIFIC*, the sub-plot is an echo of the musical's main social theme which is racial prejudice.

Sub-plots can occasionally offer a dimension to a character that is missing in the rest of the story. In *CASABLANCA*, for example, Rick, who says he sticks his neck out for no one, is shown to have a heart and a sentimental side when he helps the young wife who seeks help in getting papers to leave Casablanca to win at roulette so she doesn't have to offer sexual favours to Captain Louis Renault (Claude Rains). Certain story gurus use the term 'dimensionalize' to describe this function. Others, who prefer not to invent yet more ugly jargon, use the more informal term 'pet-the-dog' story moments. This perhaps odd phrase refers to scenes, often in police crime stories, where the hard, gritty and cynical officers in charge, are given a scene where they can come home and pet the dog, or the equivalent, just to show they have a homely side. A literal example of a pet-the-dog scene can be found in the movie *SEVEN*. This *film noir* is a dark tale of murders around the seven deadly sins, but the dog scenes at home with David Mills (Brad Pitt) lighten the mood and offer an insight into the more homely private life of the detective.



As suggested, comic relief can be an important function of a sub-plot. Think of Dogberry in *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING*, Malvolio in *TWELFTH NIGHT* and the pranks of Lancelot Gobbo and his father in *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*. Sub-plots are also ways of introducing interesting and diverting characters, particularly on journey or road-movie plots, for example in *MAD MAX* or *WEEKEND* and, classically, in *ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND*.

“Most short stories have but one plot. The very best, however, have what I call a plot-and-a-half – that is, a main plot and a small sub-plot that feeds in a twist or an unexpected piece of business that adds crunch and flavour to the story as a whole.”

Elizabeth Sims, American writer, journalist, and contributing editor at *WRITER'S DIGEST* magazine



DON CORLEONE: I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse.
From *THE GODFATHER*

The Set-up or Precursor Sub-plot

It's possible in a story to have a completed sub-plot, with its own beginning, middle and end, as a precursor to the main plot. In the film *THE GODFATHER* a sub-plot involving the singer and

sometime Hollywood actor Johnny Fontaine is initiated and completed before the main plot even begins (the A Plot being the attempted assassination of Don Corleone which leads to Michael becoming part of the Corleone mafia family and eventually its Godfather). Johnny Fontaine, thought to be based loosely on Frank Sinatra, asks his Godfather, the mafia boss Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando), to arrange it so that he gets back the lead role in a Hollywood movie from which he was recently fired. However, even after a visit from Corleone's consigliere (the Godfather's trusted friend and adviser), the producer of the movie still says no. But this is the mafia we are talking about and so when the producer wakes up in bed next morning with the head of his prize racehorse dripping blood all over the satin sheets, well, it's not long after that that Johnny Fontaine returns to the role he coveted. This sub-plot it should be said has no direct connection with any other sub-plot, nor has it any relationship with the main plot, which, as said, is Michael's rise to power and his takeover of his father's business. Its function, apart from diverting the audience before the main plot begins, is primarily to illustrate the capacity and ruthlessness of the Mafia. Interestingly it does this by omitting a lot of what happened, so that the audience are forced to figure out for themselves how Corleone's henchmen managed to kill the horse and get its head in the bed. It would have been possible, for example, to have a scene where we see some hoods bribing a stable boy. Another scene kidnapping the

butler's wife and following on from that a scene where the butler has no choice but to put sleeping pills in the producer's bedtime drink. There could even have been a scene where the butler and the stable boy help the henchmen put the horse's head in the bed. All this, of course, is rather fanciful. But that's the point, for the audience is left to create their own synopsis of brutality and power. Whatever ploy is thought up it – butlers and stable boys or housekeepers and maids – the scenario in our heads would need the reach, muscle and mercilessness of the Mafia. And perhaps, therefore, it is more powerful dramatically to leave all that to our imagination.

Of course a precursor sub-plot doesn't have to be independent of the main plot. In fact a precursor sub-plot can help set-up the main plot. This happens, for example, in *CASABLANCA* with the 'letters of transit' sub-plot involving Signor Ugarte (Peter Lorre). This plot begins with Ugarte asking Rick (Humphrey Bogart) to hide the letters until Ugarte needs them, only Signor Ugarte is shot by officers as he tries to escape Rick's bar. This mini-plot, with the climactic death of Ugarte, is completed even before the arrival of Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman) whose presence becomes the focus of the main plot. These early events around the 'letters of transit' show not only how dangerous a place Casablanca is, but also the ruthlessness of Rick who refuses to help Ugarte when the officers come to arrest him. And, more importantly, the letters of transit themselves, hidden

in the piano, become a key plot element in the Ilsa-Rick-Laszlo love triangle.



Shakespeare's *MEASURE FOR MEASURE* offers an example of a play with a sub-plot that, as it were, foreordains the main plot. The play begins as a drama about a man, the Duke, who delegates power to his deputy, Angelo. Angelo is then told to put into force a moral and sexual purge in the city of Vienna, but unknown to Angelo, the Duke secretly observes the actions of his deputy. However, this 'clean-up operation' plot isn't the central focus of the play, but more a set-up plot for something more sinister. The central focus of the play becomes apparent in two stages. The first is when the deputy Angelo sentences Claudio to death for seducing Juliet, and the second is when Angelo then offers to free Claudio if Claudio's sister, Isabella, will have sex with Angelo. This is all set against the clean-up operation but this plot has its own distinct action, and more importantly, its own moral dilemma.

Another example from Shakespeare of a set-up plot might be said to be the assassination of Julius Caesar in *JULIUS CAESAR*. It's a

surprise to many who see the play for the first time just how relatively early the death of Caesar comes in the drama (act three, scene one). The endless fractional fighting and the chaos and disruption caused by the political aftermath of assassination are, you might argue, Shakespeare's true focus. Shakespeare seems to be saying, if you get rid of a powerful and substantial leader without first considering the consequences, you're likely to end up with leader who is as vacillating as Gaius Octavius. To be fair to history, Octavius went on to become better known as the Emperor Augustus, a long living and successful emperor, but that wasn't Shakespeare's point. And Shakespeare's history dramas RICHARD II, the Henry VI plays and RICHARD III play out a similar action of chaos in an unstable political world. Anyway, whether JULIUS CAESAR should be described as having an early completed sub-plot, followed by a main A Plot or rather double A plots in a diptych two part structure is a moot point.

JULIUS CAESAR: Et tu, Brute – Then fall, Caesar!

From William Shakespeare's JULIUS CAESAR, Act 3, scene 1, line 85



MARION CRANE: Do you have any vacancies?

NORMAN BATES: Oh, we have twelve vacancies. Twelve cabins, twelve vacancies.

From PSYCHO, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, with screenplay by Joseph Stefanob, based on the novel by Robert Bloch

The Decoy or 'Red Herring' Sub-plot

A very different type of set-up sub-plot is the 'decoy plot' or red herring. An example of this can be found in PSYCHO, which begins by talking its audience in one direction and later turns sharply in another. The main plot in PSYCHO seems to be about a woman, Marion Crane (Janet Leigh), who conspires with her lover and then leaves town with stolen money. She and her lover, Sam Loomisare (John Gavin), are set-up as the joint protagonists and there's even a lengthy scene setting out their problems and how taking the money is the only solution.

Anyway, as a result of bad weather, Marion Crane stop off at a motel. This action seems no more than a digression. Well, until that is she is killed in the shower. The whole leaving-town-with-the-money plot, though dramatic and absorbing enough, was only a structural ploy. A dummy plot to disorientate to the audience. And it was a clever ruse by Hitchcock because now with Marion dead and with no apparent protagonist, our sympathy and emotional focus moves naturally enough to Norman Bates, that nice man who runs the motel.

Luigi Pirandello's *SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR* offers an example of a decoy plot to open the play. The play starts with actors preparing to rehearse another Pirandello play, namely *THE RULES OF THE GAME*. However, the expectation of a backstage drama is suddenly sidelined by the arrival of six strangers. The director of the play is angry at the disruption and demands an explanation. The father in the group then explains that they are unfinished characters in search of an author to complete their story. The purpose of all this, as with Hitchcock's *PSYCHO*, is to disorientate the audience. However, you might argue that in comparison to *PSYCHO*, what is established at the start of *SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR* is more decoy exposition than an actual plot.

A very much more substantial 'decoy' plot can be found in the film *12 MONKEYS*. The movie is a time travel tale where Jeffrey Goines (Brad Pitt) is the leader of a radical group that may have released a deadly virus that creates a catastrophe in the future and James Cole (Bruce Willis) is on a quest to stop him. This pursuit plot takes up almost the entire movie. But it becomes apparent towards the end of the story that this entire chase and hunt was little more than a red herring. The possible disadvantage and danger of having a decoy plot play such as this is that audiences will become frustrated and annoyed when they discover that all their emotional effort has been focused on a false trail. That said, *12 MONKEYS* does have a

neat twist ending that makes up for the all the narrative deception and sleight of hand.

Decoy sub-plots it should be said are rare in what is usually referred to as serious drama or literary fiction. The term 'red herring' is now primarily applied in whodunits, where they act as false trails within the main plot action and are ultimately just 'smoke and mirrors' to distract your attention away from the actual murderer. The term 'red herring', incidentally, was popularized in 1807 by William Cobbett, a campaigner for Parliamentary reform, who told a story about using strong-smelling smoked fish to divert and distract hounds from chasing a rabbit as way of making a comparison with the politics of the day. In fact, herrings were used by trainers to get horses to follow a hunt rather than be distracted from it. Anyway, Cobbett used the story so often that the figurative meaning of a 'red herring' soon took hold.

MARION CRANE: Do you go out with friends?
NORMAN BATES: Well, a boy's best friend is his mother.
From the movie PSYCHO



“When you drop a pebble into a pond, ripples spread out, changing all the water in the pool. The ripples hit the shore and rebound, bumping into one another, breaking each other apart. In some small way, the pond is never the same again.”

Neal Shusterman, author of DREAD LOCKS

Multi-Plots

In multi-strand narratives there is no A Plot as such. Instead you have numerous individual yet sometimes interacting stories. And since there is no main plot, perhaps calling these multi-plots ‘sub-plots’ is something of a misnomer.

The multi-strand plot is sometimes described as a ‘pebble-that-creates-the-ripples’ type plot. This is because in multi-strand stories, the status quo is disrupted by a single event, which, like the stone thrown into a still pond creates undulating waves, thus setting off a series of responses from a diverse group of characters. An example of this is the movie V.I.P.S where rich and famous passengers are stranded together in the First Class V.I.P. lounge as a result of all flights from Heathrow Airport being cancelled due to fog. The linking device here for the interacting stories is the place itself and the situation of being stranded. There is a single linking device as well in the 2022 movie THE ALLEYS, which is a crime caper set among the labyrinthine alleys of East Amman where a blackmailing voyeur sets off a series of unintended events and actions, causing the lives of those living that community to collide and interact.

There are too those dramas that feature a central character but are in effect a series of short and independent plot actions featuring that character. The World War Two film MRS MINIVER has no through main plot action as such, but instead is a series of self-contained tales revolving around a single person, where the theme in each story is strength in adversity.

“Life doesn’t have plots and sub-plots and denouements. It’s just a big collection of loose ends and dangling threads that never get explained.”

Grant Morrison, Scottish comic book writer, screenwriter, and producer, whose work is known for its nonlinear narratives, humanist philosophy and countercultural leanings



ENHANCING THE TALE

The Art of the Sub-plot: HAMLET, THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION and THELMA & LOUISE

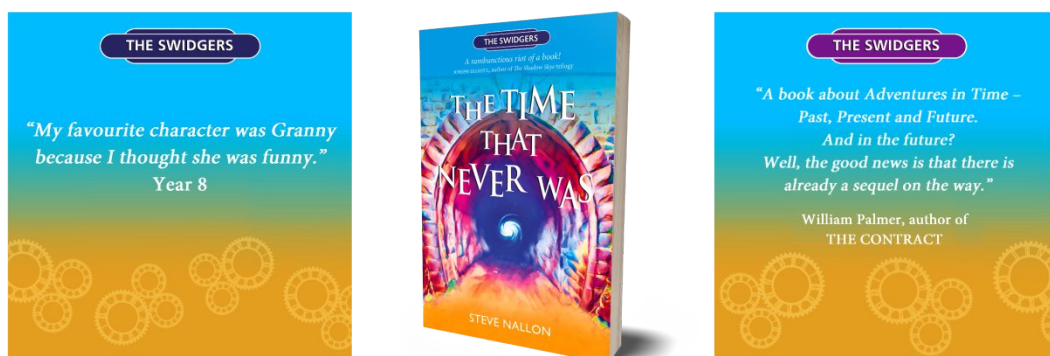
*FORTINBRAS: Go, Captain, from me greet the Danish king
Tell him that, by his license, Fortinbras
Craves the conveyance of a promised march
Over his kingdom.*

From Act 4, scene 4 of William Shakespeare's HAMLET

The Sub-plots of HAMLET

All the sub-plots in HAMLET have, to differing degrees, a connection to the main plot. The B-plot in HAMLET that is complementary to A-plot is the Laertes sub-plot, as this resonates with, and, to some degree, mirrors the main plot. Following the killing of Polonius, Laertes's father, Laertes challenges Hamlet to a duel. And this plot is complementary because it is a revenge-based action, though not, Laertes believes, to the death.

The Fortinbras sub-plot on the other hand offers an ironic contradictory between the two princes who, it is observed, are opposites when it comes to taking decisive action. ‘Young Fortinbras’, as he is frequently referred to in HAMLET, has little direct dramatic impact on the main action and hardly appears in the play at all. Yet this prince of Norway is not irrelevant. He’s a prince who, like Hamlet, has recently lost his father. However, unlike Hamlet, Fortinbras is a soldier and man of decisive action. And we know this because a small piece of land was lost to the Danes and so Fortinbras has put together a force to recover it. In fact, this expedition acts as a kind of backdrop to the action of the play. On his heading back home through Denmark, Fortinbras, arriving, at the court, sees the slaughtered corpses and, with both Claudius and Hamlet now dead, the young prince of Norway claims the throne.



Because the Fortinbras sub-plot has little, if any, direct interaction with the main plot, many theatre directors conscious of the extreme length of the play, often cut it all together. However, the sub-plot does show Claudius to be an effective leader in trying to

deal with Fortinbras's forces, which, as Voltemand, Claudius's emissary to Norway, explains, were initially against Denmark itself. But, as said, the main purpose of Fortinbras is in establishing a diametrical opposite to Hamlet. Two princes, two dead fathers to revenge, but only one prince – the manly soldier of action – survives.

The arrival of the Players is a more contrasting sub-plot, in that it gives the grim prevailing mood and direction of the drama a change of pace. The entrance of the Players is always welcome when HAMLET is performed because it offers an opportunity for spectacle and physical comedy. Of course the Players also add to one of the themes of HAMLET and that is the question what is truth and what is pretend or 'antic disposition' or role playing. However, the Player, or rather the play he is intending to present to the court, also offers Hamlet the opportunity to gage the guilt of innocence of Claudius – "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King." You can see here how the Player sub-plot is coactive with main plot in a way that the Fortinbras sub-plot is not.



The Ophelia love plot and the Polonius spying plot are both coactive sub-plots in that they complicate the main plot action. Not only that, another of the themes of HAMLET is corruption, and the spying of Polonius on the two lovers and Ophelia's complicity both resonate with the idea that 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark'. Of course, how the love plot is played out in practice in the theatre is very much a directorial choice. Does Hamlet's love for Ophelia truly send him mad? Or is Hamlet's affection for Ophelia merely part of his continuing pretence?



Polonius's actions, though supported by Claudius, are not strictly speaking counter actions to Hamlet. However, the conclusions of the Ophelia sub-plot (Ophelia committing suicide) and the stabbing by Hamlet of Polonius as a result of Polonius's meddling, directly complicate the main plot by directly bringing in to the action Laertes. And it is, of course, this coactive involvement that leads to the climatic fight where it is with a poisoned sword that Laertes (unknowingly) fatally wounds Hamlet.

The Rosencranzt and Guildenstern sub-plot is spy plot on Hamlet put into effect by Claudius, though the degree to which they understand they are being manipulated and used isn't exactly clear. Rosencranzt and Guildenstern are, like Polonius, part of the theme of the play – *Something is rotten in the state of Denmark* – and they are, as in many tragedies, minor characters who get caught up in someone else's action and as result end up dying. This is 'The Net' concept of tragedy, meaning that tragedy captures many (both innocent and guilty) in its sprawling mesh. As Guildenstern says in Tom Stoppard's play ROSENCRANZT AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD which focuses on their predicament, "There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said – 'no'. But somehow we missed it."

The Gravedigger is one of the more interesting and memorable characters, despite his minimal contribution to the action. And apart from just being funny at a time when the play certainly needs a few laughs, the other main function of the Gravedigger is to show a side of Hamlet we have not seen before. Hamlet with the Gravedigger is a very different Hamlet to the one we have witnessed earlier who in a fit of rage murders Polonius. With the Gravedigger, Hamlet appears at ease with himself and strangely resigned to the world and its peculiarities, especially death. Without this scene the play would lack the existential dimension to the character of Hamlet that makes him such a universal icon, and, of course, such a modern figure.



What all these sub-plots in HAMLET have in common is that they all interact with and complicate (or complement) the main plot to greater or lesser degrees. Apart from the obvious dramatic function of adding complexity to the main plot, the sub-plots also function to reveal the theme of the play, to provide comic or a temporary change of pace and to introduce a side of a character that might not be possible otherwise.

ROSENCRANTZ: I don't believe in it anyway.

GUILDENSTERN: What?

ROSENCRANTZ: England.

GUILDENSTERN: Just a conspiracy of cartographers, then? "

From Tom Stoppard's ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD



RED: [narrating] You could argue he'd done it to curry favour with the guards. Or, maybe make a few friends among us cons. Me, I think he did it just to feel normal again, if only for a short while.

From THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION, the 1994 American movie drama written and directed by Frank Darabont, based on the 1982 Stephen King novella RITA HAYWORTH AND THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION

The Sub-plots of THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION

THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION main plot has two basic actions, redemption and escape. Interestingly, how the escape action was actually brought about only becomes clear towards the end of the movie. Until then it is cunningly disguised by the redemption action.

THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION is set during the depression of the 1930s and it is a prison drama centring on a banker, Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins), wrongly convicted of his wife's murder. The redemption action is partly concerned with atonement ("She was beautiful. God I loved her. I just didn't know how to show it, that's all. I killed her, Red. I didn't pull the trigger, but I drove her away. And that's why she died, because of me. The way I am") but most of all it is about the need to find and rekindle the human spirit in the most adverse conditions ("Remember Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies").

Andy's actions, particularly helping the other prisoners by offering them hope through music and reading, are his means of

surviving the inhuman treatment he receives from both the prison officers and a gang of prison rapists called 'The Sisters'. But, in one of the most memorable examples of *coup de théâtre* in modern cinema, it turns out Andy's actions weren't at all what they seemed.

There are several sub-plots in THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION which reflect in some way on the redemption theme. 'Red' (Morgan Freeman) leaves Shawshank only when he insults the parole board for their patronising attitude, but in doing so he illustrates his true regret and deep remorse. Building of the library is an action aimed at giving back the prisoners a part of their humanity. Even the rock hammer to make a chess set, the poster of Rita Hayworth and the corrupt trust funds all seem on the surface to have the specific purpose of giving Andy Dufresne a better and more fulfilling prison life.

Of course, there are many counteractions to the redemption action, notably the male rapists and the intransigence of the Governor. And Andy is even warned by his buddy Red that hope is a dangerous commodity in prison: "Let me tell you something, my friend. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane." However, once the rapists are dealt with by the prison guards, life does become easier for Andy, and even the Governor relents and gives in to some of Andy's requests. As for the main counteraction against the escape plan, well, in a way that is time, for it's going to take Andy many years to dig out his tunnel.

There are two contrary sub-plots in THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION and they both feature the old timer Brooks Hatlen, played by James Whitmore. When Brooks is offered parole he attempts to kill a fellow inmate, Heywood (William Sadler) in order to stay in jail. And wanting to stay in jail in a drama where one plot is escape is clearly a contradictory action. Anyway, Books is persuaded not to kill Heywood and he is eventually released on parole. But the walls of Shawshank have taken away any chance that Brooks Hatlen could cope with the modern world outside and ultimately he takes his own life – an action that is certainly contrary to the redemption theme. Of all the sub-plots in THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION the Brooks plot-lines has the least direct effect on the main plot, but nevertheless they add poignancy and irony to the overall theme.

In THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION the main relief moment is not comic but musical. And it occurs when Andy locks himself in the Governor's office and plays a section of THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO over the tango system for the whole jail to hear. The arrival of Tommy Gill does bring some light relief to the Shawshank prison, as everyone likes the guy straight away as he's charming and funny. However, something Tommy knows would show that Andy was innocent all along, and as result of this knowledge Tommy is murdered by the prison guards. And it is this action which leads to one of the biggest turning point in the movie: Andy's decision to risk an escape.

The sub-plots in THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION certainly illustrate and enhance the theme of redemption. In fact the whole movie seems to be a series of loosely related or episodic sub-plots. So diverting and stimulating one forgets to ask where is the story going? But then comes the reversal, that escape. The rock hammer to make a chess set, the picture of Rita Hayworth and even the trust funds set up by Andy the former banker, all at least on the surface seem to have the specific purpose of giving Andy a better life in jail. But no. Oh no. The hammer was to dig the tunnel, the movie poster to hide the hole and the trust funds were a way of giving Andy a secure financial life outside after his escape. Brilliantly and cleverly disguised, these sub-plots were in part decoys to the main escape action. But we only discover that in the brilliant and powerful climax. No wonder THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION is often voted one of the best stories of modern times.

RED: [narrating] Andy was as good as his word. He wrote two letters a week instead of one. In 1959 the state senate finally clued in to the fact they couldn't buy him off with just a two-hundred-dollar check. Appropriations committee voted an annual payment of five hundred dollars just to shut him up. And you'd be amazed how far Andy could stretch it.

**From THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION, written and directed by
Frank Darabont, based on the Stephen King novella RITA
HAYWORTH AND SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION**



THELMA: I had a suggestion that we go to the police, but you didn't like that, so frankly, Louise, I'm out of ideas.

LOUISE: Well, what's the big rush, Thelma? I mean, if we give 'em enough time, they'll come to us.

From THELMA & LOUISE, directed by Ridley Scott and written by Callie Khouri

The Sub-plots of THELMA & LOUISE

THELMA & LOUISE, like THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION, is an escape plot: an escape to Mexico in order to avoid being arrested by the police. In THELMA & LOUISE, two women, Louise (Susan Sarandon) and Thelma (Geena Davis) decide to take a weekend break. On the way they stop off for a few drinks in the bar where Thelma is chatted up by one of the men who first dances with her and later takes her outside when she gets dizzy. But his intentions are violent and sexual, so Louise kills the man after he attempts to rape Thelma. However, instead of calling the police, the two women go on the run. And so the main plot action of escape begins.

Important to the main action is the back story of Louise herself being raped in Texas. This not only adds credibility to the shooting but also explains the unusual escape route, as Louise refuses to cross

Texas on the way to Mexico. The back story also makes the pursuing police officer, Arkansas State Police Detective Hal Slocumb (Harvey Keitel) more sympathetic to the situation of both women.

Unlike THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION, all the sub-plots in THELMA & LOUISE can be considered in the knowledge of the on-going main plot action, that is, the escape plan. And as this is a road movie, most of the sup-plots come from characters encountered along on the road. For example, there is a sexist tanker driver who constantly makes rude gestures towards Thelma and Louise. When the tanker driver pulls over at the request of the two women he perhaps thinks his misogynistic shouting has somehow impressed them, but he soon learns this is not the case when Thelma and Louise blown up his tanker. This is a moment of comic relief but it is also coactive with the main plot because the explosion is so large that it alerts the police to where the two women are geographically. A second comic relief moment is when the Rastafarian cyclist blows dope into the bullet holes of the car track holding a police officer to the tune of *I Can See Clearly Now the Rain Has Gone*. However, this has little function in the tale other than comic relief at a time in the story when Thelma and Louise's situation is becoming ever more serious.

Another encounter on the road involves the hitchhiker J.D. (Brad Pitt). He's a good looking guy and an engaging character. Thelma in fact has a night of passion with him and discovers for the

first time the true delights of sensual joy. As Louise says, “Oh, darlin’, I’m so happy for you. That’s great. I really am. You finally got laid properly. That’s so sweet.” However, J.D. steals all the money belonging to the two women, which leads to Thelma holding up a store, which not only makes their situation worse but also alerts the police to where they are on the road. Gradually the ring around the two women tightens and ultimately there is only one way to go: over the edge of the Grand Canyon.



What both THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION and THELMA & LOUISE show in different ways are how sub-plots working together can enhance theme, but also interact with, and often become essential to, the main plot action. It was suggested earlier that perhaps we should consider the main plot as the melody and the sub-plot as the harmony. And the point to be emphasised here is that melody and harmony are not written to be heard separately – and as such they should be considered always as part of the whole. Perhaps that is the proper way to see – and, if you will, hear – sub-plots. And if you want to extend the comparison further, perhaps

contrasting or contradictory sub-plots are those which offer a musical counterpoint to the main focus of the piece.

STATE TROOPER: [sobbing] Please! I have a wife and kids. Please!
THELMA: You do? Well, you're lucky. You be sweet to 'em, especially your wife. My husband wasn't sweet to me. Look how I turned out.

From THELMA & LOUISE, directed by Ridley Scott and written by Callie Khouri



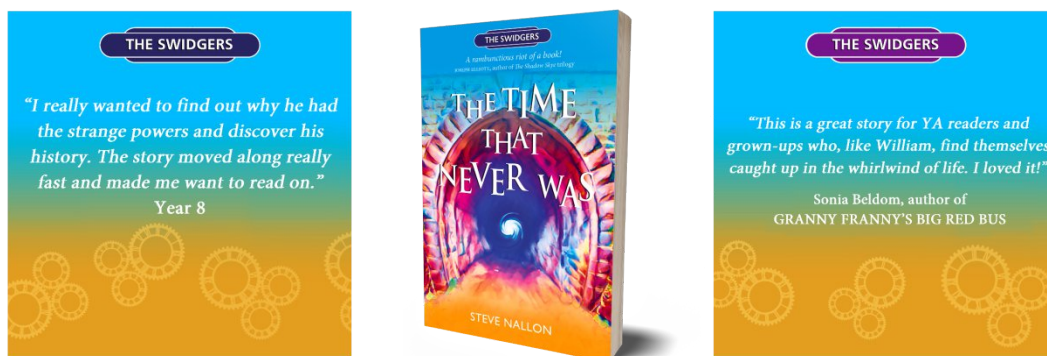
THE PLAYER: We're actors — we're the opposite of people!"
From Tom STOPPARD'S ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD

Is Aristotle Turning in his Grave?

A word here about here to THE SECOND SHEPHERD'S PLAY (SECUNDA PASTORUM) in *The Wakefield Mediaeval Pageant Cycle*. The play is just over 750 lines. Ostensibly the plot is about the announcement of the birth of Christ and the shepherds' visit to the stable. However, the Angel doesn't arrive until line 638. What happens from line 1 to 637 is a plot involving Mak and a 'borrowed' sheep. It's fun and would certainly have appealed to a mediaeval farming community. However, such a comedy sub-plots independent

to the main plot are, with one or two exceptions, almost unknown in stage drama. Why? Well, it's our old friend Aristotle.

POETICS stressed the importance of a single and complete 'unity of action' so strongly it became consciously or unconsciously so pervasive that it is hardly ever questioned. Although stage drama has stretched Aristotle's theories, and indeed broken them by adding sub-plots and even double plots, it has never quite allowed a sub-plot its independence. A completely independent plot action that is finished before the main action begins is for the stage dramatist (and indeed screenwriter or novelist) roughly equivalent to a mortal sin and is punishable by everlasting damnation on the slush pile. In other words, it just isn't done.



But the creators of *The Wakefield Pageants* probably never read Aristotle – they might not have been able to, for one thing and this meant they didn't know the so-called rules. What they knew about were people, not the functions of characters in dramatic action. And perhaps that's why the response of audiences seeing such plays today is often to say how fresh and invigorating they are.

Part of that freshness is surely seeing dramas which work in practise (especially if they make us laugh) which don't – or shouldn't at least – work on paper. Well, according to Aristotle anyway.



ENHANCING THE TALE

Theme and the Axis of Conflict

“Good fiction always begins with story and progresses to theme; it almost never begins with the theme and progresses to story.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

Theme

One way of looking at ‘Theme’ is to ask, first, what’s the controlling or central value that is expressed in the story, and, second, how is that brought about through the action spine of the tale? To see how this works, let’s take the examples of three sex disguise tales, where in each someone is secretly masquerading as the opposite gender. ‘Switch Comedies’, is how Hollywood usually describes them.

First, TOOTSIE (1982).

Michael Dorsey (Dustin Hoffman) is a respected actor, but one seen as difficult in rehearsal, who, because of his bad reputation, now finds himself out of work. After failing to get even a part in a daytime television soap opera, Michaels disguises himself as a

woman, 'Dorothy Michaels'. Dorothy auditions for a role in the same daytime soap and ends up playing the iconic role of a female hospital administrator, Emily Kimberly. 'Disguising as a woman in order to get work' is then the action spine of the story. And what Michael learns in the process is that if a man lives the life of a woman that man can learn – and here comes the value – to become a better man. Well, at least one who is more respectful towards women

Next, the film musical YENTL (1983).

After her father dies, Yentl, played by Barbra Streisand, wants to continue to study as she had done with her father. The problem is only men can enter a Yeshiva, a Jewish religious school, so Yentl cuts her hair short and calls herself Anshel, her late brother's name. The action spine here is 'Disguising as a man in order to study what only a man can'. The value that Yentl/Anshel learns is that once you have lived the life of a man, you can no longer go back to the traditional role expected of a woman. And that social value is passed on to the woman Yentl/Anshel 'married', her 'bride' Hadass, plus the man Yentl loved, Avigdor, who goes onto marry Hadass.

Finally, VICTOR/VICTORIA (1982).

An aging cabaret performer, Toddy, now in difficult financial circumstances, has the idea of passing off Victoria (Julie Andrews) as a man, 'Count Victor Grazinski', a homosexual female impersonator. As a result of her remarkable singing voice, Victoria/Count Victor becomes an immediate sensation. The action then is 'Disguising as a

man in order to earn a living'. One night, King Marchand, a Chicago gangster, watches in the audience and is enchanted by the woman he sees on stage, only of course when Count Victor takes off 'his' wig, he reveals himself to be a man. VICTOR/VICTORIA is a farce and in the complications of the plot, Victoria, who falls in love with King Marchand, learns that if being disguised as man means you cannot have your man, then it is better to return to being a woman. But there's something else too. Although King Marchand suspects that 'she' is a 'he', he still kisses 'him', saying "I don't care if you are a man." What King Marchand learns is that love can cross over the supposed social boundaries of gender, sex, sexuality.



Here then we have three tales which, as often happens in Hollywood, came out roughly at the same time and, in the general terms of what a 'Switch Comedy' is, have much the same plot. YENTL, with its Jewish setting, was even nicked-named 'TOOTSIE ON THE ROOF'. However, the point is that although they have similar actions, the theme ultimately explored in each is different.

Not of course that these stories are saying anything that new, for many of the ideas and values explored here can also be found in William Shakespeare's gender fluid play TWELFTH NIGHT.

"Theme is elevated critical language for what the character's main problem is."

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)



"If you find some theme that keeps you working, don't question it. Let that theme be sufficient to fuel your work."

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

Theme Values

Human values come in many forms. Some are obvious such as the values of love, freedom and learning. But as we've seen with our three sex disguise stories, how values are expressed can differ. Take the idea of success. Success can be a good thing and it is often portrayed as the reward in a story for being determined against the odds. In simple terms, the value expressed is *Hard work pays off*. This can be found in many stories, especially those that feature inventors (THE DAMBUSTERS, EDISON, THE MAN) or tales with sporting heroes (ROCKY, KING RICHARD). But success can also be achieved through

selling-out or cheating. This idea is explored in, for example, *THE COLOR OF MONEY*. In other stories, obsession with success ends up being very destructive, for example *ALL THAT JAZZ* and *42nd STREET* where it kills you, or, as in *THE SOCIAL NETWORK* where you lose all your friends. It isn't that *EDISON, THE MAN* is true and *THE SOCIAL NETWORK* is not true, it's simply that the nature of how that value is expressed is different.

Intelligence could be said to be a human value. But sometimes simplicity as opposed to cleverness can also be a truth (*BEING THERE*). Truth itself is a human value but sometimes in life a little self-deception helps you cope in getting by (*THE OWL AND THE PUSSYCAT*). Love, of course, is the greatest of all human values, but love that becomes an obsession can also become tyrannical (*SUNSET BLVD.*). Then there is the value of justice. Sometimes we fight against injustice and the system is beaten and we win (*THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION*), in other stories the system is indestructible and we lose (*THE HILL, BREAKER MORANT*).

We began looking at theme by reflecting on several sex disguise stories but now let's consider a popular 'Body Change' tale, namely *BIG*. *BIG* is a movie about a boy who, by some sort of wishing or magic, suddenly becomes overnight a grown man, but still with the child way of thinking. It's a simple fantasy tale about a child who longs to be an adult, yet nevertheless it has some very mature values. In order to appreciate how important it is to be a child, Josh

has to become an adult who never completed his childhood. What BIG is saying, and it does it through both the comedy and the drama, is that childhood is an essential milestone in the journey to becoming an adult. And there's something else too, and that is to be a good adult you have to keep at least some of your child within.

"A profound theme is of trifling importance if the characters knocked around by it are uninteresting, and brilliant technique is a nuisance if it pointlessly prevents us from seeing the characters and what they do."

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)



"I put the words down and push them a bit."

Evelyn Waugh, English novelist

Character as Theme

'Representation' is popular word in literary and cultural studies. The idea that something in a story stands-in for or represents something beyond itself is what keeps many academics in business. The academic paper on a narrative is then shown to the writer of that story, who then dismisses the theories explored in it as 'hogwash and baloney'. The film director John Ford famously came out with that sort of expression (and much, much worse) when he

heard about how academics had analysed his movies. But that doesn't mean those readings and meaning aren't there. In fact, he writer or director may know they are there but choose not to acknowledge them. Or it may be all subconscious and the writer or director are genuinely unaware of what they have created which others can see but they cannot. Whatever view you take it can at least be argued that in many stories characters can and do represent more than themselves. Take Evelyn Waugh's BRIDESHEAD REVISITED.



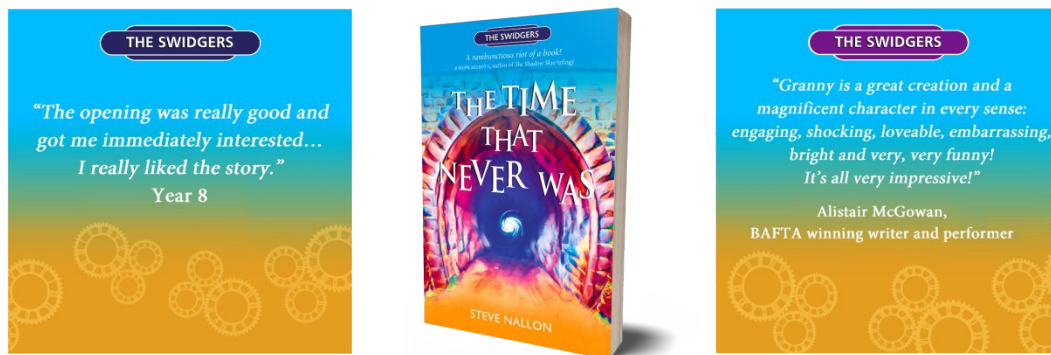
Many people get confused when BRIDESHEAD REVISITED is referred to as a Catholic novel. Yes, it's certainly about a Catholic family, but how does that make it a novel about Catholicism? Well, for a start the full title is BRIDESHEAD REVISITED: THE SACRED & PROFANE MEMORIES OF CAPTAIN CHARLES RYDER, which gives you a clue as to its theme. And then there's Waugh own words when he wrote to his literary agent A.D. Peters saying, "I hope the last conversation with Cordelia gives the theological clue. The whole thing is steeped in theology, but I begin to agree that the theologians won't recognise it."

But surely it's the characters themselves who are the real giveaway? For each – and let's not be frightened here of using the word – is a representation of an aspect of Catholicism. There's Lady Marchmain, the matriarch of this Recusant Roman Catholic family, who stands for ancient tradition. There's Lord Marchmain, who is the sinner who returns to the faith. Then there's 'Bridey' (Earl of Brideshead), who accepts whatever he's told to believe and does it without question and so represents the unquestioning believer.



Central to the tale is Lord Sebastian Flyte, the troubled younger son who seems to be fighting something within himself. There are strong suggestions that Charles Ryder and Sebastian are lovers, so perhaps it's human sexuality that is at the heart of Sebastian's struggle. And on that issue he wouldn't be alone among the Catholic flock. However, some, including the Catholic novelist David Lodge, have even suggested that what Sebastian is truly fighting is his 'calling' to the priesthood, though nothing is quite that explicitly stated in the novel. However, Sebastian does end his days with monks, even if he is aided by the numbness that comes with alcohol.

Sebastian's sister Lady Julia Flyte, who at first refuses to be controlled by the conventions of Roman Catholicism, does return to its strictures later in life. Abiding by rules and learning to accept their parameters is a strong theme of Catholic life. Finally, there's Sebastian's youngest sister, Lady Cordelia Flyte, whose devout Catholicism is to be found in wanting to do service to those less fortunate than herself.



Each member of the Marchmain family is seen through the eyes and experience of Charles Ryder, the outsider. The final image, the light of the tabernacle, which, in Catholic thinking, reflects quite literally the presence of God, is the final image Ryder leaves us with in the tale:

Something quite remote from anything the builders intended has come out of their work, and out of the fierce little human tragedy in which I played; something none of us thought about at the time: a small red flame – a beaten-copper lamp of deplorable design, relit before the beaten-copper doors of a tabernacle; the flame which the old knights saw from their tombs, which they saw put out; that

flame burns again for other soldiers, far from home, farther, in heart, than Acre or Jerusalem. It could not have been lit but for the builders and the tragedians, and there I found it this morning, burning anew among the old stones.

“The Roman Catholic Church has the unique power of keeping remote control over human souls which have once been part of her.

G.K. Chesterton has compared this to the fisherman’s line, which allows the fish the illusion of free play in the water and yet has him by the hook; in his own time the fisherman by a ‘twitch upon the thread’ draws the fish to land.”

Evelyn Waugh



“Drama’s capacity to point up connections is one of the reasons it has – historically – been so successful in comparing and contrasting different worlds: the objective and the subject, the individual and the collective, the personal and the political, the worlds of family and the state.”

David Edgar, HOW PLAYS WORK

Axis of Conflict

When the character values of the Hero/Protagonist clash with the beliefs of the Shadow/Antagonist then what you have is more than just a personal battle but one which is played out at an ethical

and social level. And some story gurus call this 'The Axis of Conflict'. Think here perhaps of the television series THE CROWN.

The axis of conflict in a story can often represents/stand in for more than the just the individual players/protagonist/antagonist themselves. And that's certainly arguable in THE CROWN. In some episodes that axis is between 'Duty' and 'Family Loyalties', at other times it is 'Tradition' verses 'Modernity'.

Of course the concept of the axis of conflict goes all the way back to Greek theatre, where the dispute between individual characters was often a distillation of the right of the individual citizen verses the duty of that citizen to the state. It's there in ANTIGONE and PHILOCTETES, both written by Sophocles, and even today it remains a popular theme of drama. Take the story of Harry 'The Breaker' Harbord Morant, more popularly known as 'Breaker Morant'. His tale became the basis for the stage play BREAKER MORANT (1978) by Kenneth G. Ross and later the 1980 film of the same name directed by Bruce Beresford. At the centre of the drama is the balance between the rights of the individual (in this case a soldier) and the needs of a state at war. Breaker Morant, an Australian horseman, poet and military officer, is ultimately convicted of executing prisoners-of-war (POWs) but at his trial it is established that he was operating under British orders. If justice had been served properly he would have been found not guilty but there is the dilemma of the upcoming peace conference – and that can

only go ahead if Breaker Morant is executed. Breaker Morant becomes a necessary scapegoat. It's realpolitik in a world of grubby diplomacy of the murkiest kind.



It can be said that understanding the central idea at the heart of the axis of conflict is often a way of discovering the theme of the tale. For the theme of any drama isn't so much a summary of story, but rather the soul of that story. Theme is an expression of not just what the writer wants to say, but what they deep down need to say.

"If the story you're telling, is the story you're telling, you're in deep sh*t."

Robert McKee, STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING



More thoughts on theme...

"Never start a play without an idea. This sounds very obvious but you'll be amazed at the number of would-be writers I've come across who try. They assume, I think, that if they start the journey, maybe an idea will occur on the way. Perhaps a map of where they're going will blow in through the car window. In my experience this never happens. You set off and after several miles finish back where you started at your own front door on page one."

Alan Ayckbourn in *THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING*

"A lot of times you get credit for stuff in your movies you didn't intend to be there."

Spike Lee, film maker

"If possible, create a visual metaphor for the film, telling us something about its theme."

Linda Seger, *MAKING A GOOD SCRIPT GREAT*

"Nothing, let me pause to argue, could be farther from the truth than the notion that theme is all. Theme is what, at its deepest level, the story is about; it is the philosophical and emotional principle by which the writer selects and organises his materials. Real literary artists are always conscious of their theme; but this does not assure good writing. Both theme and message (that is, subject and specific preachment) are likely to be more visible in a cheap western than in Proust's REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST."

John Gardner, *ON BECOMING A NOVELIST* (1983)

"I write about the American dream: if you set your mind to do something, you can do it."

Jackie Collins

“A film is – or should be – more like music than like fiction. It should be a progression of moods and feelings. The theme, what’s behind the emotion, the meaning, all that comes later.”

Stanley Kubrick, film maker

“I hold any writer sufficiently justified who is himself in love with his theme.”

Henry James, novelist

“No play worth its salt says nothing at all. It would actually be difficult to achieve this (though I’ve read some in my time that do come very close). We often dismiss our light comedies and farces as trivia with nothing to say. With the successful ones, this is generally untrue.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“Memory isn’t a theme; it’s part of the human condition.”

Hilary Mantel, writer

“Literature must rest always on a principle, and temporal considerations are no principle at all. For, to the poet, all times and places are one; the stuff he deals with is eternal and eternally the same: no theme is inept, no past or present preferable.”

Oscar Wilde

“I don’t think this business of dominant themes is conscious on the part of the author; it just happens that way – it’s bound to happen that way.”

John Fowles, novelist

“Theme is like the floors and structural supports in a fine old mansion, indispensable but not, as a general rule, what takes the reader’s breath away.”

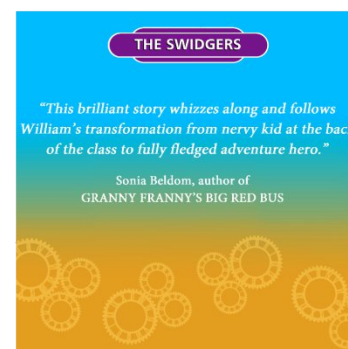
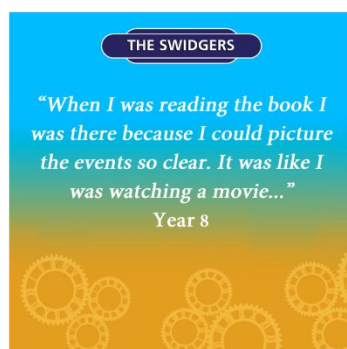
John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

“A common mistake in beginners... is to be so obsessed with content that they are in danger of creating something that is too heavy to move anywhere. In other words you can have too many ideas in one play. The result can be a play in which, although it nobly tackles all the ills of the world – the evils of global capitalism, the brutality of some police states, global warming, third-world exploitation, the dangers of racism, sexism, homophobia – a lot is discussed and nothing much actually happens: it takes several hours to go nowhere and depress everyone.”

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

“I’m a bit cynical about craft. I think there’s a natural mystique in the novel that is more important. One is trying, after all, to catch reality, and that is extraordinarily and exceptionally difficult... craft is a grab bag of procedures, tricks, lore, formal gymnastics, symbolic superstructures – methodology, in short. It’s the compendium of what you’ve acquired from others.”

Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART



ENHANCING THE TALE

Story Dynamics, Pacing and Rhythms

“You can make an interesting story less interesting by putting it all into one strand: ‘and then, and then, and then.’”

Adam Hochschild, American author, journalist and lecturer

Dynamics, Pacing and Rhythms

‘Forward motion’. ‘Rising action’. ‘Propelling movement’. ‘Progressive complications’. ‘Driving impetus’. All story gurus have their own terms for what is essentially story momentum. What they are all talking about is that development of the story where events and happenings become more complicated and the obstacles faced get bigger. In common parlance, it’s where ‘the plot thickens’ or, as Granny observes in SWIDGERS, ‘That’s put the goat in the daisy garden.’

Dynamics. In physics, the dynamic is the force that stimulates change, growth or development in a system. And dynamics do the same thing in Story. But the change has to be in proportion to the force. That said, sometimes in personal development and relations

an apparent small action can lead to life changing growth. But if so, it is important to make sure we understand why.

Pacing. This is more to do with what the writers or creators of the story believe the reader or audience can cope with. Too fast, they'll become exhausted, too slow, they'll get bored and give up. Even action movies take 'breathers' or 'interludes', where there are moments of relief from the seemingly constant momentum. The outside eye of the book's editor, or film editor if it's a movie, can be very useful when considering pace.

Rhythms. Measured flows of pulses, short or long, stressed or unstressed, forever changing but still within a pattern. Variation is essential in any story, for sameness eventually wears you down. There was once a fascinating study done of Bach's music. First the score was altered so that the rhythms became more uniform and then a second version was done where the rhythms were made more dissimilar. The uniform rhythmic patterns failed to engage listeners, whereas the more varied and broken patterns were alienating. Call him Mister Goldilocks, but Bach, you see, had found the perfect balance. Of course, we can't all have the genius of Bach, but trying to find the right rhythmical balance within the story pattern is, though it sounds a little abstruse and airy-fairy, a key part of understanding how a story works.

Some more thoughts on dynamics, pacing and rhythms...

“As soon as the goal is set, the spectator anticipates the possibility of its attainment. This anticipation expresses itself as a desire to arrive at the goal. And this desire causes the forward movement in the mind of the spectator... Our forward movement stops the moment the goal is attained.”

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

“Pace is the speed at which or narrative unfold... I believe each story should be allowed to unfold at its own pace, and that pace is not always double time. Nevertheless, you need to be aware – if you slow the pace down too much, even the most patient reader is apt to grow restive... Mostly when I think of pacing, I go back to Elmore Leonard, explained it so perfectly by saying he just left out to the boring parts.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

DOCTOR EVIL: *It seems the tables have turned, Mr Powers.*
VANESSA KENSINGTON: *[entering under guard] Go ahead, Austin. Don't worry about me.*

SCOTT: *[entering] I can take my Sega, right, dad?*
AUSTIN POWERS: *[grabbing SCOTT and holding him at gunpoint] It seems the tables have turned again, Dr. Evil.*

DOCTOR EVIL: *Not really. Kill the little b*****d, see if I care.*
 From AUSTIN POWERS: INTERNATIONAL MAN OF MYSTERY,
 directed by Jay Roach and written by Mike Myers

“Our primary function is to create an emotion and our secondary function is to sustain that emotion.”
 Alfred Hitchcock

‘To feel the rhythm of life (and the rhythm of life is a powerful beat)

*To feel the powerful beat (puts a tingle in your fingers and a tingle
in your feet)*

*To feel the tingle in your fingers (rhythm in your bedroom, rhythm
in the street)*

To feel the tingle in your feet (the rhythm of life is a powerful beat)'

From the song *The Rhythm of Life*, written by Cy Coleman (music)
and Dorothy Fields (lyrics)

"More jeopardy equals more comedy."

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES



*"We are all interludes in history, a drawn breath to make pause in
the rush, and when we are gone, those breaths join the chorus of
the wind. But who listens to the wind?"*

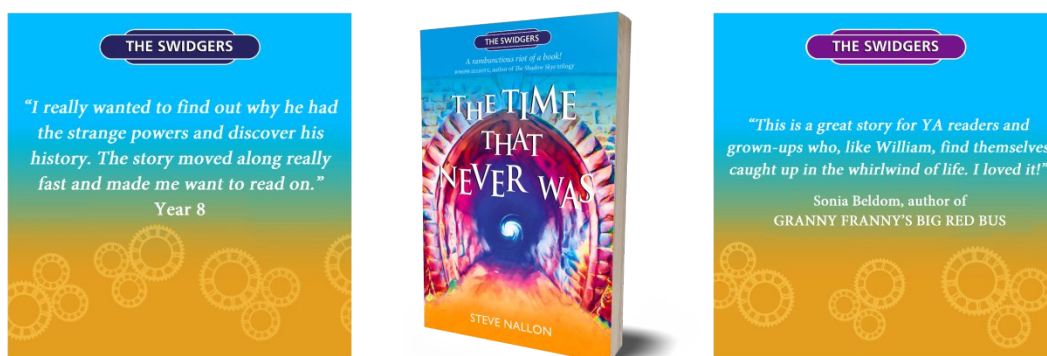
Steven Erikson, pseudonym of Steve Rune Lundin the Canadian
novelist and anthropologist

Interludes and Comic Relief

Interludes come in many forms. In *BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID* there is a welcome break from all those guns and hold-ups with the somewhat anachronistic pop song *Raindrops Keep Falling on Your Head*, where in a montage sequence Cassidy and the Kid get very playful on bicycles. In *YENTL*, the relief is more pictorial,

for when we enter the city for the first time we are presented with images of its architecture and its splendid buildings.

Often just before the crisis/climax of a story we are given some sort of light relief. In *HAMLET*, for example, it's the arrival of Osric, a somewhat flamboyant servant. Famously in *THELMA & LOUISE* there is the blowing up of the truck of the sexist trucker who has been taunting the two women throughout their journey. Both stories have been pretty heavy going up until this point and so some change in the dynamic is certainly useful before we get to the heavy climaxes.



And change in the dynamic is the key point when it comes to interludes and comic relief: Relentless tension, suspense, or misery can work in certain tales but readers and audience inevitably get frustrated and fidgety. So at least think about ways to vary the rhythms of your story.

In his in book *THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING* Alan Ayckbourn says, “When directing a comedy search for the serious. When directing a drama, on the other hand, seek out every scrap of legitimate humour.” William Shakespeare no doubt would have

agreed with that. In fact, he purposely put into his plays comic characters. Think of Dogberry, Lancelot Gobbo, the porter, the nurse, Bottom, Malvolio and even, to a degree, Thersites in TROILUS AND CRESSIDA.

“At the end of a sentimental scene, a treacle cutter is essential. ‘A treacle cutter’ is the old gag-writers’ term for a funny line that cuts through the sticky, saccharine, cloying feeling of sentimentality.”

Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES



“There is nothing like a doorbell to precipitate the potential into the kinetic.”

**Wallace Stegner, American novelist, short story writer,
environmentalist, historian and Pulitzer Prize winner**

Kinetics, Movement and Position

The movie medium has a major advantage over the written word, and to a degree the stage, in that the form itself (the film or now digital process) can distort the kinetics of action through fast, slow or reverse motion. There’s the comic frantic fast motion movement of The Keystone Cops, the concentrated slow motion of the dedicated runners in CHARIOTS OF FIRE, the reverse motion of

destruction/reconstitution of statues in Eisenstein's revolutionary OCTOBER: THE DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD or, more recently, of backwards entropy in Christopher Nolan's TENET, plus still motion freeze frames in the movies GOODFELLAS and IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE. The movie world also has the option of cartoon animation, whether it be Disney, Pixar, or in the past MGM, Fleischer and Warner Brothers, which is able to use exaggeration of figures and movement that would be impossible in the real world.

Visual comedy on stage or screen also has its own special kinetics. There's the 'double-take', for example, where a 'take' is a physical reaction to seeing something and so a double-take is a repeated look/reaction, usually when the first glance either didn't register or was somehow unbelievable. The master of the double-take was the actor James Finlayson, but you'll find it in the visual reactions of Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy. Other kinetics that are specifically part of the comic world are the 'prat-fall', an exaggerated collapse to the floor, and the 'slow-burn', the long silent reaction to some calamity or accident, most famously that which comes after a custard pie in the face.

A word here about the importance and direction of eye movement. The eye naturally moves from left to right, meaning left to right from the point of view of the person looking. When we read not surprisingly it is from left to right. A screen or stage movement that works with, as it were, the direction of the eye is, therefore,

easier and more natural for the eye and the brain to experience. Because of this it is traditionally to have the hero travel (from the audience's perspective) from screen left to screen right, whereas the villain more often moves from screen right to screen left. Theatre traditionalists will be aware that pantomime villains when coming onto the stage always enter from the right from the audience's point of view (which in theatre terms is always called 'stage left' as that is the perspective of the actor) and the Good Fairy enters from the left (again meaning left from the point of view of the audience). Related to this difference between left and right is the fact that the movie directors knows that the right of the frame is the stronger side simply because that is the side of the frame to which the eye is naturally drawn.



Movement and kinetics then do play a part in how we experience a story. And therefore it's important not just to keep the story active at a dramatic level but also keep it moving in a literal sense. Even stories set on one room need activity and motion. The play THE WHALE by Samuel D. Hunter is about an obese man who

can hardly even move any more, but the movement he does make, especially the climactic walk across his small flat, becomes key to the drama.



But how does kinetics, movement and position apply to the novelist who works with words not images? Well, certainly thinking visually is as important for stories using the written word as those seen on screen or stage. Imagining the scene cinematically (or at least in terms of physical action) can be a good way for a writer to create a scene on the page. Words make the best pictures, and all that. Yet, it should be said that such a way working may not suit all stories or styles.

“For STAR WARS I had to develop a whole new idea about special effects to give it the kind of kinetic energy I was looking for. I did it with motion-control photography.”

George Lucas, writer and director



He was quite young, wonderfully handsome, extremely agreeable, and, to crown the whole, he meant to be at the next assembly with a large party. Nothing could be more delightful! To be fond of dancing was a certain step towards falling in love; and very lively hopes of Mr. Bingley's heart were entertained.

From PRIDE AND PREJUDICE BY Jane Austen

Dance

There is a very powerful moment in Brian Friel's play DANCING AT LUGHNASA where the Mundy sisters, working one day in their rudimentary rustic kitchen, simply begin to dance. This 1990 drama is set in County Donegal in the north of Ireland in the fictional town of Ballybeg and it takes place in August 1936 around the festival of Lughnasadh, the Celtic harvest festival. It's a bitter story of poverty and loss, but that moment those sisters begin to dance is one of thrilling theatricality. Suddenly drab and dreary lives are transformed by the energy and vibrancy of dance, giving a sense of the deep emotional, physical and indeed sexual possibilities that are never realised elsewhere. And dance, uniquely perhaps, has the powerful dramatic capacity to change and alter lives in a near instant. And often does so in the most joyful way.

Dance in stories often has a sexual context. In HAROLD AND MAUDE there is little if any sex presented on screen but the teenage Harold and the elderly Maude love to dance together. In SUNSET BLVD. there is a tense tango between Joe and Norma, whereas in

BEAUTIFUL THING there is the very public close-holding dance of the two young gay lovers, Jamie and Ste, to Mama Cass's *Dream a Little Dream of Me*, plus those who join them, such as the mother, Sandra, and neighbour, Leah. The angel Michael in the movie MICHAEL may not be able to have sex, but that doesn't stop him doing the next best thing. And dances so well.



Dance in fact has many story purposes and potentials. In TITANIC the vitality of the Irish dancing in Third Class contrasts sharply with the staid social customs of the English elite in First Class. In BABE when the farmer is nursing a pig who won't eat or drink, the farmer dances – and at the end of the dance the pig is eating. In RAIN MAN Charles 'Charlie' Babbitt (Tom Cruise) finds a way of getting physically close to his brother by teaching Raymond (Dustin Hoffman) how to dance. In BIG, when the boss of the toy company sees Josh playing chopsticks with his feet on the giant keyboard in FAO Schwarz, it is those simple dance-like moves that become a key turning point in the story because from then on Josh experiences a change of fortune.

County balls and dances and what happens at them are also often key turning points in the novels of Jane Austen. Think particularly of EMMA and PRIDE AND PREJUDICE. Who dances with whom, how they dance, what they say as they dance, why they looked at someone else while they were dancing – all of these have distinct dramatic possibilities in Austen's tight social world where dance is the key to finding love itself.

Some more thoughts on dance...

"There are shortcuts to happiness, and dancing is one of them."

Vicki Baum, Austrian writer known for the novel MENSCHEN IM HOTEL (PEOPLE AT A HOTEL) (1929) which was published in English as GRAND HOTEL and which was later adapted into a MGM film and later a musical

"Dancing is like dreaming with your feet!"

Constanze Mozart, wife of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

"The body says what words cannot."

Martha Graham, American modern dancer and choreographer

"Dancing is the poetry of the foot."

John Dryden, poet

"To watch us dance is to hear our hearts speak."

Indian Proverb

"Dancing is silent poetry."

Simonides of Ceos, Greek lyrical poet

"Dance first. Think later. It's the natural order."

Samuel Beckett, playwright

"The truest expression of a people is in its dance and its music.

Bodies never lie."

Agnes de Mille, American dancer and choreographer

"Dancers come and go in the twinkling of an eye, but the dance lives on."

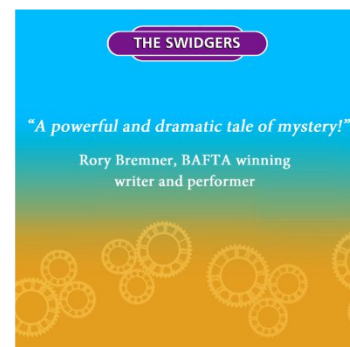
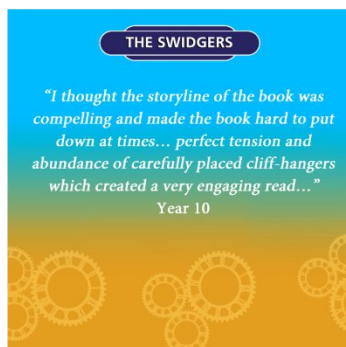
Michael Jackson, pop singer and dancer

"The moment is everything. Don't think about tomorrow; don't think about yesterday: think about exactly what you're doing right now and live it and dance it and breath it and be it."

Wendy Whelan, American ballet dancer

"Dancers are the athletes of God."

Albert Einstein



"Hand in hand, on the edge of the sand, they danced by the light of the moon."

Edward Lear

"Those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music."

Friedrich Nietzsche, philosopher

“In a society that worships love, freedom and beauty, dance is sacred. It is a prayer for the future, a remembrance of the past and a joyful exclamation of thanks for the present.”

Amelia Atwater-Rhodes. American author of fantasy fiction

***‘All I ever needed was the music, and the mirror,
And the chance to dance for you.’***

***The Music and the Mirror* from A CHORUS LINE, lyrics by Edward Kleban, music by Marvin Hamlisch, book by James Kirkwood and Nicholas Dante, show conceived by Michael Bennett**



ENHANCING THE TALE

Progressive Complications, No Escape and Inexorability

“Sometimes it’s easier to think of structure in question-and-answer form. Q: What are the worst possible consequences of Macbeth’s decision to kill the King of Scotland? A: The massed ranks of his former allies will march upon him seeking revenge.”

John Yorke, INTO THE WOODS

Progressive Complications

Big. Bigger. Biggest.

Difficult. More difficult. Most difficult.

Sad. Sadder. Saddest.

Deep. Deeper. Deepest.

Base adjective, comparative and superlative. And with the superlative you’ve hit the most extreme of a story, be it the highest of lowest.

Progressive complications, however, are concerned with the middle part of the story, before the extreme high or the low. What we are talking about here then is an advancing development in a tale

that is always more intense than that which came before it, and where the degree of complexity gets more and more challenging. In other words, the ‘bigger’, the ‘more difficult’, the ‘sadder’ and the ‘deeper’ part of your tale. It was Robert McKee who coined the term ‘Progressive Complications’ but other story gurus have their own and they include ‘Rising Action’ and ‘Forward Motion’. Phrases associated with this part of the story are “The pressure grows”, “The stakes are rising”, “The clock is counting down”, and “There can be no turning back now.”

Progressive complications come in many forms. In *HIGH NOON*, Will Kane gets more and more isolated. In *SUNSET BLVD.* Joe Gillis gets closer and closer to the *femme fatale* Norma Desmond. In *APOCALYPSE NOW* Captain Benjamin L. Willard becomes crazier and crazier. In Jean-Luc Godard’s *WEEKEND*, which is set in the modern world, the inconsistency of the tale becomes more and more inconsistent – even Emily Brontë turns up at one stage.

The progression in *MR HOLLAND’S OPUS* (1995), directed by Stephen Herek and written by Patrick Sheane Duncan, is not so much about the music teacher Mr Holland but more the challenges he faces in his job. His initial test is to teach a student who cannot play well to play better. Fairly straight forward. Next a student comes along who can’t play at all, but Mr Holland manages to help. But then comes the ultimate challenge and that is to offer a way for a deaf student to appreciate music. It’s an obvious point to make but if

those challenges were in reverse order the story simply wouldn't work.

Most action movies work on the basis that the situation progresses from bad, to worse, and eventually to worst. The worst usually meaning the hero is about to be killed by the villain. Take DIE HARD. The situation is difficult because the hero, John McClane, who is trying to stop the hostage takers, is running around without any shoes. Well, yes, that's bad enough, but then the villain, Hans Gruber, spots the bare feet and says to his accomplices, "Shoot the glass." Bad just got worse. And then comes the worst, when John McClane is at the mercy of Hans Gruber. This climatic action culminates in a building edge cliff-hanger scene where Gruber is hanging onto the wrist of McClane's wife Holly. But it's not over yet because Gruber, though he knows he's likely to fall and die, has a gun and begins to take aim at the wife. Only then comes the twist – for what Gruber is really holding onto isn't so much Holly's wrist, but the expensive watch on her hand which is set-up earlier. McClane unclips the strap and Gruber falls to his death. *Phew!*



Progressive complications are often reflected in the *mise-en-scène*. For example, in *KIND HEARTS AND CORONETS* as Louis bumps off more and more D'Ascoynes in order that he will one day inherit the title and the estate, his clothes become more and more aristocratic. There's a similar sartorial progression in *MRS HARRIS GOES TO PARIS*, for as Mrs Harris more and more enjoys the Parisian lifestyle, the outfits she wears become more and more chic (it's set-up that she can borrow from the clothes rail in the place where she is staying). In *DOG DAY AFTERNOON*, which begins almost as a comedy, the hostage situation to raise money for a sex change becomes darker and darker – and literally so as the electricity is switched off and night begins to fall and the sun slowly fades.

Another aspect of progression is that it involves an ever-increasing number of people. On this point there is what is known as the 'The Net' theory of tragedy, where the actions of a leader, such as a King, not only affect himself and those around him, but also the entire country and those who live in it.

But this principle can be applied beyond tragedy. For example, *SOMERSBY*, loosely based on the story of Martin Guerre and the imposter who assumed his persona. The plot is such that if the hero sticks to his claim that he is who he says he is then he will be executed for murder, but if he acknowledges the truth that he is an imposter then the farming community he has now become a part of will lose everything as that land was bought on a fraud. The stakes in

this story got bigger because the whole village depend on his decision. A further example could be said to be SAVING PRIVATE RYAN. The plot concerns finding Ryan and taking him out of the war zone because the deaths of his brothers mean that his mother has only him left. But the plot turns and by the end of the tale it's no longer about just one man, for Ryan refuses to abandon his post defending the town's bridge which he knows is crucial to stop the Germans taking it over and all that that would mean. Saving the one becomes the battle to protect the many.



There are films that are arguably not progressive in a story structure sense. Take the movie TITANIC. There's a scene where Jack is handcuffed to a pipe and the water is rising. Rose needs to swing an axe to break the chain. The risks are high, for he could lose a hand or even be killed. But Rose, who stays with Jack even though the freezing water is rising, closes her eyes and... yes! the axe does strike through the chain of the handcuff and Jack is saved. It's a great scene, for it shows Rose's emotional commitment and her willingness to potentially risk her own life in what is a major gamble.

But then a scene then follows where the two face a locked door where the key has dropped to the floor. True, the water is rising but is it progressive? Is it more dangerous and more dramatic than the scene with the axe which came before it? Is it even needed? Well, probably not. And it's that scene and others like it which perhaps explain why so many people felt the movie was over long.

“You can make an interesting story less interesting by putting it all into one strand: ‘and then, and then, and then.’”

Adam Hochschild, American author, journalist and lecturer



“There is a point of no return, unremarked at the time, in most lives.”

Graham Greene, novelist

The Point of No Return

Part of the progression of difficulty in a story could be said to be where you reach ‘The Point of No Return’. Phrases associated with this moment are “He’s burnt his bridges”, “He’s running out of options” and “There’s no turning back now”. The key point of the point of no return is that the audience mustn’t be able to say, “Well all he had to do was retrace his steps” or “He could have returned to

where he was and put things right” or whatever. In *BIG*, for example, once the magic has taken place, it’s important that the fair has moved on and Josh can’t simply go back and reverse his wish. Or at least that isn’t possible for the foreseeable future.

The point of no return is particularly pertinent to thriller and action movies. *THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER* is a classic example because with each plot development Jack Ryan gets nearer to the submarine and his way back to comparative safety is cut off. First there’s the helicopter drop, where it’s running out of fuel, and then there’s the submergible. Sometimes in a tale the point of no return is even highlighted in the script. In *THE UNTOUCHABLES*, FBI agent Jim Malone says on a liquor raid, “If you walk through this door now, you’re walking into a world of trouble. And there’s no turning back. You understand?” and in *BACK TO THE FUTURE III* there’s a physical sign on the model railway line saying ‘*Point of No Return*’.

But the concept isn’t exclusively to the action movie, for a different type of no return can be found in *CINEMA PARADISO*, where Alfredo instructs Toto never to come back to the village:

ALFREDO: Get out of here! Go back to Rome. You’re young and the world is yours. I’m old. I don’t want to hear you talk anymore. I want to hear others talking about you. Don’t come back. Don’t think about us. Don’t look back. Don’t write. Don’t give in to nostalgia. Forget us all. If you do and you come back, don’t come see me. I won’t let you in my house. Understand?

SALVATORE: Thank you. For everything you've done for me.
ALFREDO: Whatever you end up doing, love it. The way you loved the projection booth when you were a little squirt.

Some more thoughts on the point of no return...

"Every second that goes by is a point of no return."

J.R. Rim, writer

"I don't think anyone, until their soul leaves their body, is past the point of no return."

Tom Hiddleston, English actor

"Stopping an argument is like pulling a weed. You have to get it before it seeds and gets beyond the point of no return."

Miranda Liasson, author

"In everybody's life there's a point of no return. And in a very few cases, a point where you can't go forward anymore. And when we reach that point, all we can do is quietly accept the fact. That's how we survive."

Haruki Murakami

"There is a point of no return, unremarked at the time, in most lives."

Graham Greene, novelist

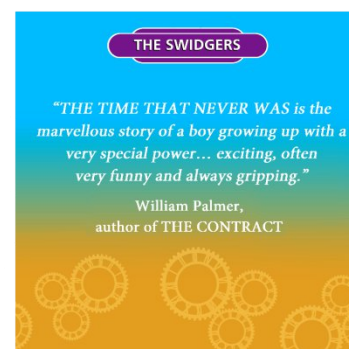
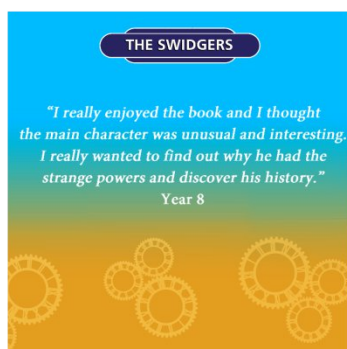


“Things become clear when there is no escape.”

Pema Chödrön, American Tibetan Buddhist, ordained nun, former acharya of Shambhala Buddhism and disciple of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.

No Escape

Phrases associated with no escape are “There’s no way out”, “We’ve reached the end of the road”, “I have you now, for you have nowhere to hide” and “You might as well surrender. We have you surrounded”. And we’ve all seen thrillers where someone is hiding in a cupboard or wardrobe with the villain on the prowl getting closer and closer. Think of the closet scene in HALLOWEEN with Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis). But it’s not always cupboards from where there is no escape, for any geographical high point can be a place where there is no longer anywhere to run. Think here of the ghostly sailors who pursue Stevie Wayne (Adrienne Barbeau) up the top of the lighthouse in John Carpenter’s THE FOG.



No escape needn't just be physical, it can be emotional and cultural as well. In Ibsen's THE DOLL'S HOUSE, Nora is trapped in a

loveless marriage. But this is 1879, so what can Nora do about it? Very little, for Torvald tells Nora that whatever the situation, she must fulfil her duty as a wife and mother. However, Nora does have an option, unthinkable as it might have been for 1879, for Nora simply leaves behind her keys and wedding ring and exits the room. Torvald breaks down and begins to cry. He then recovers slightly and starts to speak, possibly believing Nora could never leave him, but as he does the door downstairs is heard closing. And in the action of that door slamming shut, the unfeasible became the possible.

A 'no escape' scenario can often produce unexpected endings. Consider THELMA & LOUISE, directed by Ridley Scott and written by Callie Khouri. Both are fugitives by the end of their journey. Their car faces has a cliff-edge in front of them down to the bottom of the Grand Canyon and behind them there are waiting dozens of police cars. They are caught, as they say, between a rock and a hard place. Except Thelma doesn't want to be arrested by the police and end up in prison:

THELMA: OK, then, listen. Let's not get caught.

LOUISE: What are you talkin' about?

THELMA: Let's keep goin'!

LOUISE: [*nodding towards the cliff edge*] What d'you mean?

THELMA: Go.

LOUISE: You sure?

THELMA: Yeah. Yeah.

But you can also have fun with the physical situations that are truly impossible. Well, depending on the reality of your world. In the comedy *LIFE OF BRIAN*, Brian runs up a tower stairway to nowhere and then... *guess what!* as he falls off into the open air he's suddenly rescued by an alien ship that just happens to be passing by. An unlikely occurrence perhaps, but we are in the bizarre and sometimes surreal universe of Monty Python.

STEVIE WAYNE: [speaking into phone] Dan, where's the fog now?
DAN O'BANNON: It should be right outside my front door now.
 From *THE FOG*, directed by John Carpenter and written by John Carpenter and Debra Hill



"I know three things will never be believed - the true, the probable, and the logical."

John Steinbeck, *THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT*

Negating the Negation

The negation of the negation is a concept in story theory that comes from the story guru Robert McKee. You'll also find the phrase used in Marxist philosophy and mathematics, but McKee's meaning is very specific. McKee talks about forces of antagonism that are

either contrary or contradictory, and it's those contradictory forces that allow for 'the negation of the negation'. McKee gives the example of 'Love' as a value and suggests two ways of 'negating' it. McKee points out that the contrary to Love is Indifference but its contradictory (or opposite or its negative) is Hate. And so the first way to create a negation of the negation for Love is to have Hate *disguise itself as Love*, where what is thought or believed to be Love is really a masquerade and a lie. And it's because Hate is pretending to be Love that there is a doubling of the negation. But there's another way as well. Forces of antagonism are usually directed outward to the world, but suppose, suggests McKee, that those energies are inward bound. This gives you, according to McKee, *self Hatred*, which is the second way of negating the negation of Love. In other words, what we are talking about here is making something doubly negative.

There are some other theories that use the idea of the negation of the negation and it might be useful to briefly consider them and how they might be applied to a story's structure. In mathematical theory, negating the negation involves establishing what the opposite of a given mathematical statement is – and this is referred to as 'negating' a statement. If a mathematical statement is true, then its negation must be false (and if a statement is false, then its negation is true). This potentially could also be a useful concept in story structure and story making in that a character arc could be

taken from a false belief that something is the case to a belief its opposite is in fact correct. Slow realisation, for example, that someone you believes loves you never has loved you. And the idea of the negation of the negation in terms of logical theory also has a potential application to story theory, for one way to prove a logical statement is correct is proof by contradiction, for in conventional logic it is accepted that if the opposite of something is false, then the something is true. This form of deduction may be useful perhaps if your character is a logical thinker in the Sherlock Holmes mould.

Another way of considering the idea of the 'negation of the negation' can be found in the theories of Hegel. In Hegelian dialectics, Hegel maintained that 'truth' is achieved by a three step process involving a thesis, an antithesis (which contradicts or negates the thesis) and ultimately a resolution by means of a synthesis or a combining of the two ideas rather than an outright replacement of either. Further, Hegel claimed that the original idea (the thesis) which comes to be negated by its opposite (the antithesis) is in turn is replaced (or negated once more) by the combining of both concepts (synthesis). The 'negation of the negation' in Hegel's theory is therefore the negation of the antithesis, which was the original negation of the thesis. It's perhaps difficult to see how any of this could apply in a practical way to the craft of story making, but it's possible at least to think of those dramatic aspects of a tale that

turn, as it were, the story on its head. Reversals of the reversals and the like.

A much simpler way of thinking about the ‘negation of the negation’ is the idea of doubling the negative. Making what is worse the very worst. Or, to be ungrammatical for a moment, the worstest possible worse. Take a comedian struggling to get laughs on stage from an audience, which, in show business they call ‘dying the death’. Well, what can be worse than that? The answer would be to have it happened when it’s an audience of other comedians. For a comic an audience of peers watching you ‘die the death’ is the ultimate worstest. And you could apply that principle of the peer group across many professions and even social meetings. For example, recovering alcoholics. Falling off the wagon in the presence your family would be bad enough, but surely the very worst would be to do it in front of your AA friends and supporters?

“Crime is common. Logic is rare. Therefore it is upon the logic rather than upon the crime that you should dwell.”

Sherlock Holmes in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s THE COPPER BREECHES

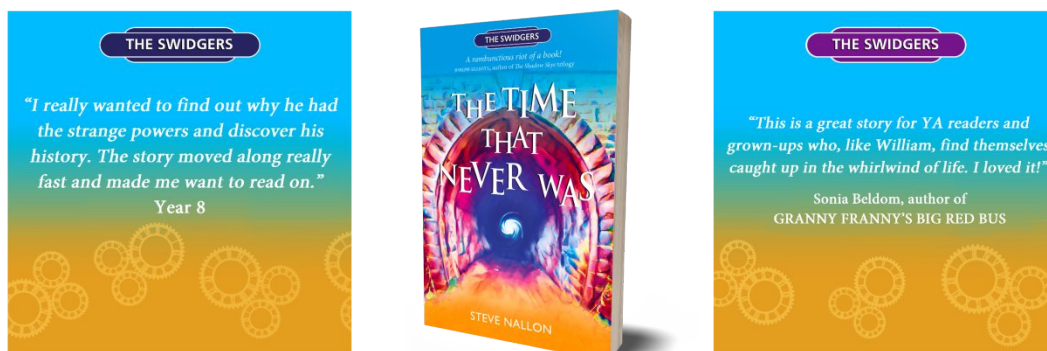


***'Oh, the runaway train came down the track and she blew,
The runaway train came down the track and she blew,
The runaway train came down the track,
The whistle wide and the throttle back
And she blew...'***

***The Runaway Train* written by Harry Warren and Robert Masse**

The Inexorable

Inexorable. From the Latin *inexorabilis*, *in-* 'not' + *exorabilis* (from *exorare* 'entreat'). Cannot be entreated, cannot be prevailed upon and so cannot be stopped – just like that runaway train that went down the hill. And that which is inexorable is a key component in certain types of story, particularly tragedies. The concept of inexorable in Greek times comes from the Greek believe that Fate (or *Ananke*) was the great controller of life. Even top god Zeus was no match for *Ananke*. And it's an idea that can be found in many tragedies of the period, notably Sophocles' OEDIPUS REX where the prophecy of Oedipus' fate is played out with dire consequences.



A modern play that explores the existential nature of the human predicament and the concept of the inexorable is Tom

Stoppard's ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD. The play isn't so much a play-within-a-play more a play in-parallel-to-a-play – that play being William Shakespeare's HAMLET, where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves caught in the machinations of the schemes of others. And throughout ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN ARE DEAD there's much philosophising from Guildenstern and the travelling Player about the nature of life, fate and how both play out in a drama:

GUILDENSTERN: We've been caught up. Your smallest action sets off another somewhere else, and is set off by it. Keep an eye open, an ear cocked. Tread warily, follow instructions. We'll be all right.

ROSENKRANZ: For how long?

GUILDENSTERN: Till events have played themselves out. There's logic at work – it's all done for you, don't worry. Enjoy it. Relax. To be taken in hand and led, like being a child again.

GUILDENSTERN: We are not restricted. No boundaries have been defined, no inhibitions imposed. We have, for the while, secured, or blundered into, our release, for the while. Spontaneity and whim are the order of the day. Other wheels are turning but they are not our concern. We can breathe. We can relax. We can do what we like and say whatever we like to whomever we like, without restriction.

ROSENCRANZ: Within limits, of course.

GUILDENSTERN: Certainly within limits.

ROSENKRANZ: What's your line?

PLAYER: Tragedy, sir. Deaths and disclosures, universal and particular, denouements both unexpected and inexorable.

GUILDENSTERN: Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace, to which we are... condemned. Each move is dictated by the previous one – that is the meaning of order.

PLAYER: There's a design at work in all art – surely you know that? Events must play themselves out to aesthetic, moral and logical conclusion.

GUILDENSTERN: And what's that, in this case?

PLAYER: It never varies – we aim at a point where everyone who is marked for death dies.

GUILDENSTERN: Marked?

PLAYER: Between 'just deserts' and 'tragic irony' we are given quite a lot of scope for our particular talent.

GUILDENSTERN: [*Looking out to sea from the deck of a boat*] Free to move, speak, extemporise, and yet. We have not been cut loose. Our truancy is defined by one fixed star, and our drift represents merely a slight change of angle to it: we may seize the moment, toss it around while the moments pass, a short dash here, an exploration there, but we are brought round full circle too face the single immutable fact – that we Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, bearing a letter from one king to another, are taking Hamlet to England.

PLAYER: We're tragedians, you see. We follow directions – there is no choice involved. The bad end unhappily, the good unluckily. That is what tragedy means.

GUILDENSTERN: Where we went wrong was getting on a boat. We can move, of course, change direction, rattle about, but our movement is contained within a larger one that carries us along as inexorably as the wind and the current.

Some more thoughts that which is inexorable...

WALTER NEFF: The machinery had started to move and there was nothing I could do about it.

From DOUBLE INDEMNITY, directed by Billy Wilder, with screenplay by Billy Wilder and Raymond Chandler, based on the novel by James M. Cain

“One only makes books in order to keep in touch with one’s fellows after one has ceased to breath, and thus to defend oneself against the inexorable fate of all that lives - transitoriness and oblivion.”

Stefan Zweig, Austrian novelist, playwright, journalist and biographer

“The sad truth is that man’s real life consists of a complex of inexorable opposites – day and night, birth and death, happiness and misery, good and evil. We are not even sure that one will prevail against the other, that good will overcome evil, or joy defeat pain. Life is a battleground. It always has been and always will be; and if it were not so, existence would come to an end.”

Carl Jung, psychologist



ENHANCING THE TALE

The MacGuffin and The Dramatic Gap

“We have a name in the studio and we call it ‘The MacGuffin’.”
Alfred Hitchcock

The MacGuffin

A word here about the ‘MacGuffin’ and how it relates to motivation. The term MacGuffin, said by some to have been coined by the screenwriter Angus Roy MacPhail who worked closely with Alfred Hitchcock, refers to whatever the thing is that the hero is after. Maybe the MacGuffin is a secret document or plans for a special type of plane, or, as in the spy thriller NORTH BY NORTHWEST, some microfilm that mustn’t leave the country and find itself in foreign hands. Alfred Hitchcock himself explained the term MacGuffin in a 1939 lecture at Columbia University in New York City:

It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men on a train. One man says, ‘What’s that package up there in the baggage rack?’ And the other answers, ‘Oh, that’s a MacGuffin’. The first one asks, ‘What’s a

MacGuffin?’ ‘Well,’ the other man says, ‘it’s an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.’ The first man says, ‘But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,’ and the other one answers, ‘Well then, that’s no MacGuffin!’ So you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all.

Why then if it’s nothing at all does it matter? Well, if you need to ask that you are probably one of those people who also wonder – since it’s the very nature of fiction that it isn’t true – what’s the point in reading it or watching it. The point is in story theory that the MacGuffin is the thing that the character most wants and cares about it. As David Mamet says, in *THREE USES OF KNIFE*, speaking specifically about Hitchcock movies, “It is sufficient for the protagonist-author to know the worth of the MacGuffin. The less specific the qualities of the MacGuffin are, the more interested the audience will be. Why? Because a loose abstraction allows audience members to project their own desires onto an essentially featureless goal.”

What Mamet is arguing in essence is that each member of the audience will supply meaning/substance for himself, herself or themselves. And Mamet adds that the task of finding or solving the problem of the MacGuffin “stands for the ability of the individual to triumph.” In short, what Mamet is saying is that psychologically the goals of drama, theatre, and fiction exist in order to explore the problems and mysteries of the human soul. In this sense the Maltese

Falcon in THE MALTESE FALCON isn't about the Maltese Falcon at all, it's really about the greed of the people who want to possess it and the wealth it is believed it will bring. And that's why in Holy Grail stories, it's about the journey to the Holy Grail and not the Holy Grail itself that is always the focus. Likewise that task in TOP GUN: MAVERICK which is to destroy a new uranium refinery in rogue state. It sounds important but it's given no context. Why? Because what matters is the dynamics of the relationships in the team that bring it off. That's what we really care about.



But perhaps the concept of the MacGuffin can also have a twist in its tale, because one of the most famous MacGuffins in cinema history is that sled called Rosebud in CITIZEN KANE, a movie based on the life of William Randolph Hearst. The point of the movie is ultimately that no single object can ever, however interesting, fully give us the worth, measure or nature of a man. Anyway, Orson Welles always claimed, laughing salaciously as he did, that 'Rosebud' was the private name that William Randolph Hearst gave to his lover's private parts.

“The more the actor is giving him or herself over to the specific uninflected physical action, the better off your movie is, which is why we like those old-time movie stars so much. They were awfully damn simple. ‘What do I do in this scene?’ was their question. Walk down the hall. ‘How?’ Fairly quickly. Fairly slowly. Determinedly. Listen to those simple adverbs – the choice of actions and adverbs constitutes the craft of directing actors.”

David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM



‘I haven’t won my wings, yet. That’s why I’m called an Angel Second Class. I have to earn them.’

Clarence in IT’S WONDERFUL LIFE

The Dramatic Gap

The ‘Dramatic Gap’ is the difference between the anticipated or expected outcome and the actual result. And obviously without that difference – that gap between what you want and what you get – there would be no story. The point is it’s the very fact that the character doesn’t obtain what it is they seek which ultimately drives the tale along. And arguably the dramatic gap should be there not just scene by scene, but also line by line, where each interaction is action in speech to obtain what is required. This was certainly the case in Greek drama, particularly in the plays of Sophocles where the

action is in the spoken line. And this way of looking at how the dramatic gap works in drama can be found in all of David Mamet's writing on dramatic theory.



The dramatic gap is often connected to the arc of the character. For example, there's a lot of talk in story theory about the problem/needs of a character and psychological flaws and weaknesses. The point here is that the action needed ultimately to overcome the dramatic gap will reveal both. And typically, a character will need to fix their psychological flaw – for example, a lack of self confidence – in order to complete the task and so bridge that dramatic gap.

"Plot is merely the mechanism by which your character is forced up against her deepest fears and desires."

Margaret Bechard



ENHANCING THE TALE

Set-ups and Pay-offs

“If there is a gun hanging on the wall in the first act, it must fire in the last.”

Anton Chekhov,

Set-ups and Pay-offs

What we are talking about here when we speak of set-ups and pay-off are ways of planting, as it were, an idea, an object or even a key character in an early part of a story with the specific intension and purpose of using it (or them) at a key point later in the tale, and usually in unexpected way. And planting as in gardening could be seen as a good metaphor for that ‘plant’ will become the ‘fruit’ that is gathered at that later stage.

Readers and audiences like set-ups and their ultimate pay-offs because of the connectivity they offer. This goes back to one’s view and philosophy of how the world works. We like to think that nothing is random in life and that everything has purpose. The connecting of one thing to another, essentially giving it a function or meaning, appeals to the way of thinking that there is a reason for

everything. It should be added here that script editors, especially in the movies, like set-ups and pay-offs because it's a technique that shows craft. "It's such a tight script," they will say, meaning that everything is plotted out and has a clear purpose. But what are the practicalities and methods of establishing the set-up and bringing about that eventual pay-off?



The golden rule of a set-up is that it must be firm enough to be remembered but not so noticeable that it is obvious. And ideally whatever is set-up should be self-contained and so its apparent function will appear closed. In TITANIC, for example, Jack teaches Rose to spit, but then this bizarre lesson is interrupted by the mother who is very embarrassed by what she has witnessed. The purpose of the spitting incident seems complete, but later Rose uses her new found skill to spit at her husband – and it's this action which becomes the pay-off. And it's a surprise because the learning-how-to-spit scene appeared to have a very different reason to be in the story. The key point here is that if a set-up is not self-contained and does not have an apparent function in and of itself, then the

audience may expect, and indeed even anticipate, its use later in the tale, thus ruining the possibility of any surprise.



Set-ups and pay-offs, of course, come in many different forms. There is the 'echo' set-up and pay-off where you might have an incident that makes you laugh first time round, only later in the story, in a different context, that same action makes you cry. For example, when in *ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST* Randle Patrick 'R.P.' McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) returns from isolation he walks through the ward as if to suggest that he has been lobotomised, only then Randle suddenly breaks out of his zombie walk and laughs that his ruse has so easily fooled his friends. However, later in the story, Randle does that same walk for real, for this time he is not mocking or pretending and he really has been lobotomised.

"I guess if she can't cut below the belt she'll do it above the eyes."
From *ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST* by Ken Kesey



***AUDREY: A matchbox of our own
 A fence of real chain link,
 A grill out on the patio
 Disposal in the sink
 A washer and a dryer and an ironing machine
 In a tract house that we share
 Somewhere that's green.
 He rakes and trims the grass
 He loves to mow and weed
 I cook like Betty Crocker
 And I look like Donna Reed
 There's plastic on the furniture
 To keep it neat and clean
 In the Pine-Sol scented air
 Somewhere that's green.***

**From LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS, music by Alan Menken and lyrics
 by Howard Elliott Ashman**

Reprises in Musicals

In musical theatre, serious numbers are often reprised in a more comedic and mocking manner. *Somewhere That's Green* is the 'I Want' song (sometimes also called the 'Wishing Number') from LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS. Audrey longs for a suburban utopia, somewhere that's green. Well, she gets at least part of her wish, because she ends up being eaten by a flesh eating plant – so indeed

she does end up 'somewhere that's green'. As she says to Seymour at the beginning of the reprise:

But I do! It's the one gift I can give you. And if I'm in the plant, then I'm part of the plant. So in a way, we'll always be together!

You'll wash my tender leaves
 You'll smell my sweet perfume
 You'll water me and care for me
 You'll see me bud and bloom
 Im feeling strangely happy now
 Contented and serene
 Oh, don't you see?
 Finally I'll be
 Somewhere thats green.



Another ironic reprise can be found in Stephen Sondheim's FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM. The first time *Lovely* is sung it is between Philia and Hero, where Hero is the would-be young male lover to Philia, a beautiful paramour:

PHILIA: I'm lovely,
 All I am is lovely.
 Lovely is the one thing I can do.
 Winsome,
 What I am is winsome,

Radiant as in some
 Dream come true.
 Oh, Isn't it a shame?
 I can neither sew
 Nor cook nor read or write my name.
 But I'm happy
 Merely being lovely,
 For it's one thing I can give to you.

HERO: You're lovely,
 Absolutely lovely.
 Who'd believe the loveliness of you?
 Winsome,
 Sweet and warm and winsome,
 Radiant as in some
 Dream come true.
 Now Venus would seem tame,
 Helen and her thou –
 Sand ships would have to die of shame.

HERO & PHILIA: And I'm happy,
 Happy that you're/I'm lovely,
 For there's one thing loveliness can do
 It's a gift for me to share with you!

A simple and charming ballad. However, later in the farce, Pseudolus, a Roman slave owned by Hero, needs, for complex plot reasons, his fellow slave Hysterium to dress up as a woman. Hysterium is unconvinced he will be able pull this off, so Pseudolus reprises the song *Lovely* and gets Hysterium to sing it with him. The same lyrics, but what was a serious love song has now become a burlesque comedy number.

And the lyricist side of Sondheim uses this serious-to-comic or sometimes comic-to-serious technique in many of his shows. *Let Me Entertain You* from GYPSY (music by Jule Styne) is first sung as an innocent upbeat song on stage by a little girl, but later it becomes the number that Gypsy Rose Lee sings when she makes her debut as a stripper. As with *Lovely*, the words are the same but the new context gives them a completely different and indeed almost lewd meaning.

***GYPSY ROSE LEE: Let me entertain you
Let me make you smile
Let me do a few tricks
Some old and then some new tricks
I'm very versatile.
And if you're real good
I'll make you feel good
I'd want your spirit to climb
So let me entertain you
We'll have a real good time
Yes sir!
We'll have...
A real good time!***

From GYPSY, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and music by Jule Styne



“The map had been the first form of misdirection, for what is a map but a way of emphasizing some things and making other things invisible?”

Jeff VanderMeer

Changing Context, Misdirection and the ‘Running Gag’

Changing the context is a technique where something is set-up and the pay-off is essentially the same action (or words) but in an alternative setting. Think here of LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL, where we see the boy playing a game where he hides himself in the drawer, but later the game is used to conceal himself in a box in the concentration camp.

Then there’s the egg joke in ANNIE HALL, which opens and closes the movie, only at the end, after watching the film, the words of the egg joke have much more significance:

ALVY SINGER: It was great seeing Annie again. I... I realised what a terrific person she was, and... and how much fun it was just knowing her; and I... I, I thought of that old joke, y’know, the, this... this guy goes to a psychiatrist and says, “Doc, uh, my brother’s crazy; he thinks he’s a chicken.” And, uh, the doctor says, “Well, why don’t you turn him in?” The guy says, “I would, but I need the eggs.” Well, I guess that’s pretty much now how I feel about relationships; y’know, they’re totally irrational, and crazy, and absurd, and... but, uh, I guess we keep goin’ through it because, uh, most of us... need the eggs.

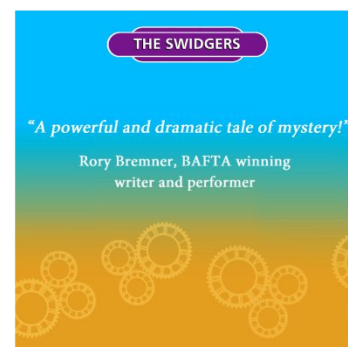
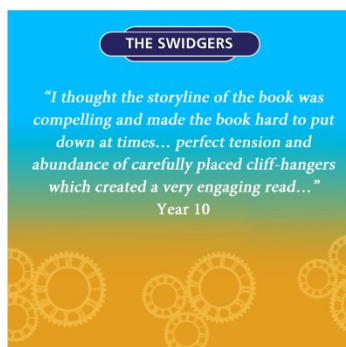
Occasionally set-ups and pay-offs work more as a misdirection or ‘red herring’, especially in detective fiction, where the purpose of

the set-up is to distract and mislead. But the red herring technique works outside of detective stories, too. For example, the match in TOY STORY seems to have been set-up in order to allow Woody and Buzz Lightyear to light the fuse and so launch the two of them into space using Woody's rocket. However, when the match is actually lit, a truck goes by and it is immediately blown out before the fuse can be ignited. *Disaster! How are they going to get lift-off now?* But then a concentrated beam of sunlight comes through Buzz Lightyear's helmet and begins to burn Woody's hand. Woody remembers how he witnessed a boy torturing toys by scorching them using the sun's rays and a magnifying glass. This principle Woody now applies to Buzz's carefully positioned globe helmet letting the beams that pass through it do their job and light the fuse, which then sparks up. Moments later the two are launched into space. The match was a clever red herring set-up with the intention of fooling you into believing a solution was near at hand. However, ultimately it was the trick with the magnifying glass, in what seemed like a self-contained scene, which was the true set-up that allowed Woody and Buzz the pay-off of sending themselves 'into infinity and beyond'. It's a great story moment and a superb example of skilful storytelling craft.

Occasionally what seem like set-ups are not paid off at all. In KING LEAR there is talk of disagreements between the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany. Perhaps Shakespeare intended at one stage that the two Dukes would fight each other but in fact Cornwall is

killed by one of his own servants after blinding Gloucester. Some critics think that Shakespeare changed his mind and then simply never bothered to remove the set-up. Or, of course, it could be a clever sleight of hand by Shakespeare in order to put the audience off the scent and so surprise them when Cornwall is suddenly killed.

It has become a bit of a cliché when a character has a long speech about looking forward to an idyllic future that that poor character is likely to find themselves dead by the end of the next reel. This happens, for example, in *THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER*, where one of the Soviet officers imagines a happy future life in America. Not without too much surprise, he is one of the first to die. If you are going to have a character talk about the future, the best thing to do is put a twist on it in some way. In the Second World War melodrama *MRS. MINIVER*, the young and recently married Carol has a moving and long speech where she talks about the likelihood of losing her husband who's serving in the Royal Air Force – but in an ironic twist of fate it is Carol herself who is killed in a German air-raid on British soil.



Set-ups and even their apparent pay-offs can misdirect a reader or audience – and the result tends to be more dramatically effective when they do. For example, in *FIELD OF DREAMS*, the back story of ‘Moonlight’ Graham is that he wanted to play baseball just once in the big league, but he gave up his dream to become a doctor in a small town. In the fantasy, the elderly ‘Doc’ Graham is offered that chance, but turns it down. However, on the road home, Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner) and Terence Mann (James Earl Jones) come across a young baseball player hitching a ride and he tells them his name is Archie Graham. The two men look at each other knowing that this guy is the young lad that ‘Doc’ Graham once was. *Great! He is going to get that chance to fulfil his dream.* Except it doesn’t work out like that at all. Graham’s true function within the story is revealed when Karen, Kinsella’s young daughter, falls from the bench and looks as if she’s about to choke to death. The young Archie Graham then has a choice to make: fulfil his dream or save the dying child. Naturally he leaves the baseball field, but as he does Archie Graham is transformed back into the elderly ‘Doc’ Graham and so can never return to the field. But Archie did have the one hit and ‘Shoeless’ Joe tells the rookie he was good, so perhaps that is enough and his dream has been achieved and fulfilled. The point about all this is the misdirection. We think we’ve had the pay-off, but actually the whole set-up wasn’t about Graham being a would-be baseball player at all but rather a doctor. Again, this is skilful plotting which isn’t always

understood or appreciated by critics.

A variation on the set-up/pay-off is the 'running gag'. It's important though to understand that a running gag is not a repeated gag. What happens should always be altered or made bigger in some way. In *THIS IS SPINAL TAP* the running gag is the deathly demise of drummers. And each death becomes progressively more extreme. First it's when gardening, then it's vomit (not his own) and ultimately spontaneous combustion.



A word here about what those who write for television soap operas call 'buried treasure'. Continuing dramas or soaps tend to think ahead in terms of months and years rather than just the next act. And if, for example, there is a storyline where a dead body needs to be hidden, and it is buried in the back garden or concealed down a drain, you can be certain that sometime in the future that garden will need to be dug up and those drains unblocked. And when that happens, the 'treasure' then becomes the storyline that follows as a result of that discovery.

Some more thoughts on misdirection...

“Writers are very good about misdirection and changeups, and that's what's great about it. We always think we know what's going to happen and then they throw a curveball that you don't see coming.”

Mike Colter

“For a professional magician, a stack of playing cards is as good as a stack of money.”

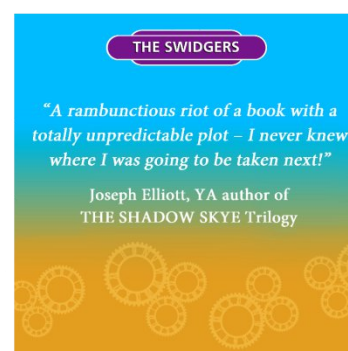
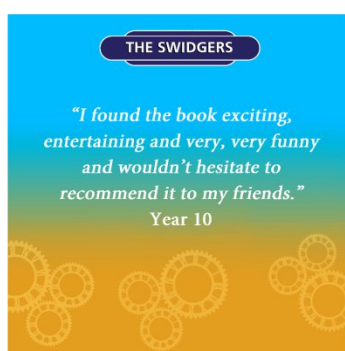
Amit Kalantri in WEALTH OF WORDS

“Misdirection. What the eyes see and the ears hear, the mind believes.”

John Travolta

“Magic consists of creating, by misdirection of the senses, the mental impression of supernatural agency at work. That, and only that, is what modern magic really is, and that meaning alone is now assignable to the term.”

John Nevil Maskelyne



“Before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point,” said Scrooge, “answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of the things that May be only?”

Still the Ghost pointed downward to the grave by which it stood.

“Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead,” said Scrooge. “But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!”

The Spirit was immovable as ever.

From A CHRISTMAS CAROL by Charles Dickens

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is a particular type of set-up and pay-off in that it is a narrative device that offers an advanced hint of what is to come later in the story. The big difference between foreshadowing and set-up and pay-off is the fact that the set-up and pay-off are often not seemingly connected in anyway, whereas with foreshadowing – the key idea being the ‘shadowing’ – the two are similar, be it thematically or from a character or plot perspective.



A famous example of foreshadowing both of character and theme can be found in THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK when Luke is being trained by Yoda on Dagobah. Luke enters a cave and here envisions his face under Darth Vader's mask. Perhaps, we may think, this is a suggestion that Luke may turn to the Dark Side? Well, to some degree his anger does later get the better of him, but what the vision is actually foreshadowing is the big revelation of THE EMPIRE STRIKE BACK – and that is that Darth Vader is in fact Luke's father.

Foreshadowing can come very early in a plot. In the *film noir* DOUBLE INDEMNITY, there is even an example of plot foreshadowing in the opening title sequence featuring the silhouette of a man walking on crutches. And a man on crutches, it turns out, is a key part of the plan of the *femme fatale* to murder her husband. The song in the movie HIGH NOON is also acts as foreshadowing, as the lyrics reflects the central dilemma at the heart of the story. *The Ballad of High Noon*, with music by Dimitri Tiomkin and lyrics by Ned Washington, is also known by its opening lyric which is "Do Not Forsake Me, Oh My Darlin'".

***Do not forsake me, oh my darlin'
On this, our weddin' day
Do not forsake me, oh my darlin'
Wait, wait along
I do not know what fate awaits me
I only know I must be brave
And I must face a man who hates me***

*Or lie a coward, a craven coward
 Or lie a coward in my grave
 Oh, to be torn 'tweenst love and duty
 S'posin' I lose my fair-haired beauty
 Look at that big hand move along
 Nearin' high noon.*

*The Ballad of High Noon, music by Dimitri Tiomkin and lyrics by
 Ned Washington*



SOOTHSAYER: *Beware the ides of March.*

CAESAR: *What man is that?*

BRUTUS: *A soothsayer bids you beware the ides of March.*

CAESAR: *Set him before me; let me see his face.*

CASSIUS: *Fellow, come from the throng; look upon Caesar.*

CAESAR: *What say'st thou to me now? speak once again.*

SOOTHSAYER: *Beware the ides of March.*

CAESAR: *He is a dreamer; let us leave him: pass.*

From William Shakespeare's JULIUS CAESAR

Prophecies, Premonitions and Predictions

Prophecies, premonitions and predictions are specific types of set-ups and pay-offs. Most obviously they are part of stories involving magic and the supernatural, but a simple prediction can be part of any tale in that a character can make an assessment of

someone's nature and behaviour and following on from that formulate reasonable assumptions as to their future, as in "He'll come to no good, just you wait and see!"

Not surprisingly prophecies, premonitions and predictions often play an important role in time travel stories, where, rather obviously, the future is already known. In the Korean time travel series ALICE (AELLISEU), written by Kim Kyu-Won, there exists *The Book of Prophecy*. *The Book of Prophecy* essentially foretells the fate of time travellers and the future, as it were, of time travel itself. It is, therefore, something of a prize. As the series progresses, the contents of *The Book of Prophecy* are slowly revealed. As is often the case with the oracles, the words and phrases of *The Book of Prophecy* are somewhat cryptic – 'A mother who went through *The Door of Time* to stop her daughter's death tries to change the past and shake the future' ... 'The child born while opening the *Door of Time* will end up controlling time' ... 'She opened the forbidden door of time, and saw the world she shouldn't have crossed. Now the punishment she must bear has been determined' and, importantly, 'Her destroyer son can only be killed by her marvellous creation'.

At least in part, what keeps the interest going in ALICE (AELLISEU) is the mystery behind exactly what the predictions in *The Book of Prophecy* mean and what will be the result if they do come to pass. Also who is the son and what is the punishment? And where does the central character Detective Park Jin-gyoem fit in? Is Park Jin-

gyoem the child born while opening the Door of Time? Is Park Jinyoem also her 'marvellous creation' or is that a reference to time travel itself? And who is the mother who tried to stop her daughter's death? Answers please, on a postcard to: 'Netflix, Now Everywhere in the World'.

In time tales, premonitions are usually left ambiguous for dramatic reasons. In the film *PREMONITION* (2007), with Sandra Bullock as Linda Hanson, the police call on Linda, a young wife, and tell her that her husband has been killed in a car accident, yet the next day she wakes up and there he is downstairs having breakfast. And waking up on another day her husband is dead again, yet the following morning she finds him there in the shower. What the heck is going on? Are these premonitions or is time somehow fracturing? Or indeed is the husband definitely dead and what Linda is going through is some kind of mental breakdown? The film remains intentionally ambiguous throughout. In a way this is because the bigger theme is forgiveness (Linda discovers her husband intended to have an affair, but didn't go through with it). Anyway, whether it's a supernatural premonition, a breakdown, or a rift in space-time, the film is ultimately about the need sometimes just to say sorry. And on those terms it is an effective grieving story.

To list every story that involves premonitions or precognition would take many hours even days – and that's just a reasonable assumption rather than actual precognition – but here is a brief

selection: THE DEAD ZONE (2002), where a man wakes up from a coma with the ability to see into other people's futures; NIGHT HAS A THOUSAND EYES (1948), a phony stage mentalist mysteriously begins to see the future for real; CLEMENTINE'S ENCHANTED JOURNEY (1985-1987), an animation series featuring a young girl who has precognitive dreams; UNBREAKABLE (2000), where a man learns extraordinary things about himself following a terrible accident; FINAL DESTINATION (2000), a young man has a sudden premonition of an air crash; HEROES (2006-2010), ordinary people suddenly develop special gifts, including one who can see into the future; FLASHFORWARD (2009-2010), every person on Earth suddenly experience black-outs and awaken with a vision of their future; NEXT (2007), a Las Vegas magician who can see into the future two minutes ahead and so is asked to help the FBI prevent a nuclear attack.



In THE SWIDGERS Time Adventure series, in the very first chapter of the first book THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, the young *Swidger* hero William experiences some sort of experience where

events happen, but then time stops, only to restart again with those events reversed. This then repeats, only with differing scenarios.

What's going on? Is William going mad? Or maybe these are visions of the future? But if so, how come they keep changing? Or could it be that Time itself is somehow fracturing? The why and how of all that is happening to William isn't fully revealed until much later in book two, *THE TIME THEY SAVED TOMORROW*. Well, it is mystery story and mystery stories make you wait...

“How long have you had that cough?”

***“Ugh! ugh! ugh! – ugh! ugh! ugh! – ugh! ugh! ugh! – ugh! ugh! ugh!
– ugh! ugh! ugh!”***

My poor friend found it impossible to reply for many minutes.

“It is nothing,” he said, at last.

“Come,” I said, with decision, “we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter.

We will go back; you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible.

Besides, there is Luchesi—”

“Enough,” he said; “the cough is a mere nothing; it will not kill me. I shall not die of a cough.”

“True – true,” I replied.

From a scene *THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO*, BY Edgar Allan Poe, as the coughing Fortunato is led to his incarceration

ENHANCING THE TALE

Imagery and Symbolism

“Symbolism doesn’t have to be difficult and relentlessly brainy. Nor does it have to be consciously crafted as a kind of ornamental Turkish rug upon which the furniture of the story stands.”

Stephen King, ON WRITING

Narrative Style

Narrative Style is best perhaps defined as the manner in which a narrative is told, but that, of course, raises the question ‘What does *manner* mean?’ Well, in practise it means the *choices that are made*. In the novel that would mean the choice of language, the type of metaphor or imagery used, sentence length (long or short) and syntax (complex or simple), whereas in the movie world, narrative style is often summed up by that all encompassing term *mise-en-scène*.

“Style is not something applied. It is something that permeates. It is of the nature of that in which it is found, whether the poem, the manner of a god, the bearing of a man. It is not a dress.”

Wallace Stevens, American poet



“An image system is a strategy of motifs, a category of imagery embedded in the film that repeats in sight and sound from the beginning to the end with persistence and great variety, but with equally great subtlety, as a subliminal communication to increase the depth and complexity of aesthetic emotion.”

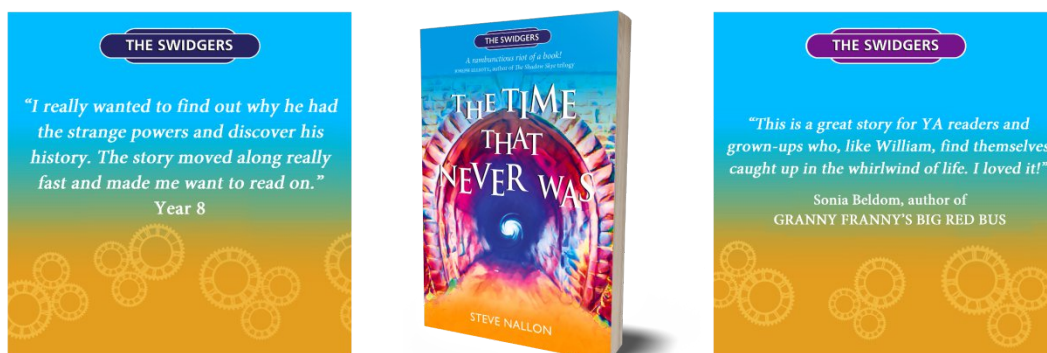
Robert McKee, STORY

Image Systems

An ‘Image System’ is essentially a strategy of symbols and images, physical or metaphorical, that are used to explore themes, create aesthetic emotional responses and increase intellectual awareness. The term itself originates with Robert McKee but other story gurus have come up with their own expressions. For example, John Truby calls it the symbol web. Anyway, the image system or symbol web can incorporate physical objects, but equally it can include the use of language and names. Another term that is often used in this area is *motif*, where the *motif* is a recurring element within the story, where the ultimate aim and purpose of the storyteller is to create a certain atmosphere or get across sometimes subliminally a particular thematic idea or even moral.

Certain objects have particular associations and it’s these connections that make them, as it were, symbols for something else. For example, the bowler hat ‘says’ Englishman, the stars and stripes

'stands for' America. Such symbols as these could be said to be part of a universal image system acknowledged and used all over the world. However, most writers prefer to create their own symbols from within their individual story environment. To do this there are various methods of charging, as you might say, these symbols with meaning. Repetition is one technique. Not surprisingly RAIN MAN, about two brothers on the road, uses doubles acts as one of its image systems (the other is water/rain). In RAIN MAN you'll find various references to Abbott and Costello (the famous routine '*Who's on First?*') and Fred and Ginger (a television broadcast of the two of them dancing on one of their films).



Another technique to indicate the significance of an object is to show in the action that it is of special importance in some way. For example, in CITIZEN KANE, when objects are being thrown around and smashed, the snow globe is excluded from Kane's destructive tantrum. Variation of the same action could be said to be another method of establishing symbolic importance. ALIEN is about the impregnation of the human body by an alien and within the film

there are numerous visual references to sexual penetration, including rolled up magazine which is used in a phallic manner and pushed down the throat of Ripley in an attempt to kill her. There are also visual references to sexual procreations, such as the pod opening up and the birth of the creature through the stomach. In ALIEN II the theme is motherhood, a natural enough progression from impregnation and precreation. ALIEN II is essentially one mother battling it out against the other.

A further way of establishing special meaning to an object is through its position on the screen. The 'Rosebud' sledge in CITIZEN KANE gets its own close-up, as does the toy bear in THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER, where the 'Bear' is constantly used to represent Russian and the 'Eagle' is used in association with all things American.

The image system in THE USUAL SUSPECTS is 'The Devil/Satan'. The opening image is a hell-like fire and the man who controls that fire is later revealed to be Keyser Söze. There are several direct references to Satan, for example, the police say, "This guy is protected from upon high by the Prince of Darkness" and another character has the line, "The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist." The colour red, often used to suggest Satan, is there in lighting at crucial moments. There is as well a direct association of Keyser Söze with that which is below the earth, that is the Subway, and when Gabriel Byrne says "You can go

to hell” there’s an edit cut to the person who is revealed to be Keyser Söze. Then there’s that character’s limp (cloven feet) and hair that shaped to a point.

Of course the idea of an image system is nothing new. Caroline Sturgeon’s book *SHAKESPEARE’S IMAGERY: AND WHAT IT TELLS US*, first published in 1936, explores the underlying image strategy in various Shakespeare plays. In summing up the nature of her study, Sturgeon quotes Polonius who advises his son, “By indirections find directions out.” In other words, the indirect imagery of the play will tell you much about the direct themes it is exploring. Shakespeare, she points out, uses images of rottenness and decay to describe the political corrupt court in *HAMLET*, and devouring animal imagery to depict the savagely cruel world of *KING LEAR*. In *ROMEO AND JULIET*, those images of the heavenly orbs the sun and moon not only connect with the astrological destiny of the ‘star-crossed lovers’, but also allow Romeo to say that Juliet is the sun, and he the moon, dependent on its rays.

There are three significant image systems in *MACBETH* and they are blood, darkness and clothing. You might even say four because birds are also prevalent throughout the story. Sparrows, eagles, martlets (“temple-haunting” as it likes to nest on tall buildings), ravens (“that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan”), owls (the “obscure bird”), falcons (“towering in her place of pride”) and crows (one of “night’s black agents”). But not all birds are killers or

harbingers of ill-fortune, for when Ross tells Macduff of the slaughter of his wife and children, Macduff cries out in passionate grief: “All my pretty ones? / Did you say all? O hell-kite! All? / What, all my pretty chickens and their dam / At one fell swoop?” As a side point, Stephen Fry made an interesting observation about these specific images in the context of authorship of the paly: “I thought Caroline Spurgeon settled this in 1935 with her master work Shakespeare’s imagery. There seems to be absolutely no doubt to anybody who reads Shakespeare, and is familiar with the text, that these are the works of a countryman. This is a man who knows about kites and fields and it’s certainly not the work of an aristocrat.”



Sometimes a writer creates an image system unconsciously, but when they recognise what they’ve done they then often go back over the manuscript and consciously enhance and expand on what they had unconsciously put in place. And here there is a correlation with the reader or audience in that they are at first perhaps unaware that the techniques of an image system is even being used. And they may remain consciously unaware of it throughout the play, narrative,

movie or whatever. But the repeated nature of the image/motif/metaphor undoubtedly makes a subconscious impact of some kind. Of course, once noticed or pointed out, the image system quickly becomes apparent and is seen to be ever-present.



In very simple terms, a symbol within an image system could be said to be an object, action, or even a setting or person that has significance and meaning beyond that achieved from its immediate dramatic function. But it's important not to all this push too hard, or make something into what it isn't. Over reading, if you will. As Freud said – or at least the apocryphal Freud – “Sometimes a cigar is just a good smoke.”

“The imagery in MACBETH appears to be more rich and varied, more highly imaginative, more unapproachable by any other writer, than that of any other single play.”

Caroline F.E Spurgeon



“The landscape is a reflection of the inner life. Since I can’t shoot the inner life, all I can shoot is the exterior but I know that when I’m filming outside, I’m filming inside. I can only really touch the inside through the *mise-en-scène*. So through the *mise-en-scène* of the outside we can explore the inside.”

Bruno Dumont, French film director and screenwriter

Mise-en-scène

Mise-en-scène literally means ‘the putting onto the stage’ or ‘what is put into the scene’. Although the term is used mainly in film criticism, its principles can also apply to narrative descriptions of place and setting in a novel. But let’s for now stick to its use in cinematic storytelling.

What we are essentially talking about when discussing *mise-en-scène* are the stylistic choices that are made by the creatives. These may come initially from the screenwriter, but later the director and other collaborators, such as the lighting director, camera operators and ultimately the editor, become involved. The *metteur en scène* (literally ‘scene-setter’) is the term for the technician, director or otherwise, who creates the *mise-en-scène*. Somewhat confusingly, the phrase *metteur en scène* is also sometimes used to describe the type of director who has technical competence in film making, but rarely adds any kind of personal style or aesthetic to a film, meaning directors with no *auteur* or distinct approach. Anyway, let’s just concentrate on the idea of *mise-en-scène* in cinematic storytelling.

In the cinema, *mise-en-scène* covers such areas as shot composition, camera moves, cinematography, and in the edit, shot transition and juxtaposition. *Mise-en-scène* also includes the actual content and substance of what is physically in the scene. The key question with *mise-en-scène* is always *What is it trying to do and achieve? What is its purpose in the narrative?*



One purpose of *mise-en-scène*, as the film maker Burno Dumont has pointed out, is its ability to suggest the inner life of a character using the outer world. Or, as the Hollywood designer Saul Bass put it in a slightly different context, a metaphorical image is *thinking made visible*. And that's the great strength of *mise-en-scène*. That said, *mise-en-scène* doesn't always fit well with the more naturalistic approach. And so if your preference is for naturalism in the movies, *mise-en-scène* may not be the story tool for you.

"No mise-en-scène has the right to be repeated, just as no two personalities are ever the same. As soon as a mise-en-scène turns into a sign, a cliché, a concept however original it may be, then the

whole thing – characters, situation, psychology - become schematic and false.”

Andrei Tarkovsky, Soviet film director, screenwriter and film theorist



“Metaphors have a way of holding the most truth in the least space.”

Orson Scott Card

Time Tales: *Motifs*, *Mise-en-scène* and Image Systems

In time travel an obvious *motif* would be a clock or watch. In *BACK TO THE FUTURE*, for example, which sends Marty back in time from 1985 to 1955, it's not surprising that the film's opening credits involves a tracking shot showing various clocks, and one even includes a figure of the silent movie actor Harold Lloyd hanging off the big hand pointing to eleven o'clock, which anticipates what actually happens to 'Doc' Brown himself on the clock tower towards the end of the movie. A bit of foreshadowing seems appropriate enough in a movie about a past with a known future. There are other timepiece references associated with *BACK TO THE FUTURE*. 'Doc' Brown himself is usually seen wearing two watches and Marty

staring at his watch from the movie poster became one of the iconic images of 1985. And of course clocks are especially important to the narrative of BACK TO THE FUTURE itself. For example, there's the obvious plot point of the Hill Valley Courthouse clock being struck by lightning and its importance in getting Marty home, but a clock also features in 'Doc' Brown's back story, where hitting his head after falling when trying to hang a clock in his toilet back in November 1955 was the pivotal moment the 'Doc' first came up with the idea of the flux capacitor.

Images of clocks and turning cogs are there too throughout HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN, where Time and the ability to turn back the clock are essential to the plot outcome. An old pocket watch is a recurring image in the time loop tale LOOPER and the German time travel mystery DARK. Oddly enough there are few references to clocks or watches in TERMINATOR. However, what you do have as an image system of sorts is the malfunctioning of different types of technology, for example, answering machines and public phone booths repeatedly letting Sarah Connors down when she needs them. It's as if every machine she encounters has simply turned against her, which is appropriate enough in a movie where an apparent indestructible robot is trying to kill her.

The opening shot of the time loop movie HAPPY DEATH DAY is of a university's clock tower, a striking clock appears early in

TIMESCAPE, a ticking watch is there at the opening of NEXT, the gift the elderly lady gives Richard Collier in SOMEWHERE IN TIME is an antique pocket watch, and the alarm clock in Bill Murray's bed and breakfast room in GROUNDHOG DAY becomes a nightmarish image as it *ad infinitum* turns from 05:59 to 06:00.



The animation movie YOUR NAME is a coming-of-age 'body/gender switch tale' and to make things even more complicated, the body switching occurs in different timeframes. The two central characters are Mitsuha Miyamizu, a high school girl living in the rural town of Itomori, Japan. Bored of the town life, Mitsuha wishes to be a Tokyo boy in her next life. One day, Mitsuha inexplicably begins to switch bodies intermittently with Taki Tachiban. Time in the tale is seen as a 'thread': "The threads twist, tangle, unravel and connect again. That's Time." The boy wears braided cords round his wrists, but to think that it is these that are making the Time connection possible is too literal, the braided cords are rather an image representing the complex ebb and flow of Time

itself. But not surprisingly when the lovers do meet, it is at twilight – ‘Kataware-doki’ – where day and night come together.

“The simile has to match the tone of its surroundings and has to be like a little joke. Writing a simile that isn’t funny on some level is quite hard.”

Ned Beaman



“Myths which are believed in tend to become true.”

George Orwell

The Underlying Story or Myth

Another aspect of the image system is what academics sometimes call ‘Mythical Infra-Narrative’. This is where there is, as it were, a mythical sub-text to the story. E.T. THE EXTRA TERRESTRIAL, for example, has a Judeo-Christian mythical narrative running underneath it. Visual references range from ET being found in a stable, beneath a starry sky, to his later resurrection from a tomb in a shroud with a beating red heart, which is similar to numerous depictions of Christ in art history. Then there is the image of those touching fingers, prominent in the promotional poster, which is a

direct steal from the Michelangelo's portrait of God and Adam in the Sistine Chapel. And it doesn't end there, for the three siblings could be said to equate to the apostles, the scientist called Keys ("I've been wishing for this since I was ten years old") is part Simeon, the old man who had waited to encounter the Messiah and who can now "depart in peace" (Luke 2:25-35), and part Nicodemus, the philosophising Pharisee who, though he comes from a group who wish to harm Christ, endeavours to understand him. Nor must we forget the escape from attackers and pursuers which has its parallel in the flee from Egypt and the miracle which scuppered them as a result of the parting of the Red Sea – or in the case of the movie E.T. the famous flying sequence. Then there's the bringing back to life of the flower (the raising of Lazarus), the conversion of the non-believing bikers (the doubtful Thomas), and to top it all an ascension into the skies followed by the rainbow of hope ("And God said, 'I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.'" Genesis: 9:13). Well, perhaps that doesn't quite top it all because the key phrase in E.T. THE EXTRA TERRESTRIAL from a theological point of view is when ET touches Elliott's forehead and says "I'll be right here!" The gift, if you will, of the Holy Spirit ("He may abide with you forever" John 14:16. Also John 7:39; John 16:7). No wonder the Catholic Church sent out letters in the 1980s to teach the Gospel message through the narrative of a Hollywood movie.

BABETTE'S FEAST (1987) didn't get the same ecclesiastical approval as E.T. THE EXTRA TERRESTRIAL but there are certainly parallels between the story of Babette's remarkable dinner and the Last Supper and the Eucharist. In fact the final words of General Lorens Löwenhielm to the elderly Marine, who loved him when younger but was denied marriage to him by her selfish father, echoes the words of Jesus himself:

GENERAL LORENS LÖWENHIELM: You must also know that I shall be with you every day that is granted to me from now on. Every evening I shall sit down to dine with you. Not with my body, which is of no importance, but with my soul. Because this evening I have learned, my dear, that in this beautiful world of ours, all things are possible.

A variation on the mythical infra-narrative technique is what you might call 'Story Infra-Narrative', or put another way, those tales where the plot resembles that of another well-known narrative, especially one from the stable of classics. The story infra-narrative of THE LION KING, for example, is essentially the tale of Shakespeare's most famous prince, for THE LION KING is when you think about it basically *Hamlet-with-fur*. In *Requiem for Methuselah*, an episode from the original STAR TREK series, Kirk and his party encounter a lonely man who calls himself Flint, who claims that he has lived across time and in his 'lifetimes' he has been Methuselah, Solomon, Merlin and many more. He has built a beautiful young woman, a humanoid robot, but it cannot love as he wants it to, for it has been

deprived of human contact. A magician, alone with a young woman who needs to find love and companionship beyond that of her father. Sounds familiar? Well, it should because it's *THE TEMPEST*, the tale of Prospero, the old magician, who's tiring of life, alone with his young daughter Miranda.

Of course, you don't necessarily need to know the original narrative upon which your tale is based to understand or follow it. You can certainly enjoy *STAR WARS* without knowing the *King Arthur* legend or Kurosawa's *THE HIDDEN FORTRESS*, yet that said, it would be difficult to appreciate or make any sense of James Joyce's *ULYSSES* without a detailed knowledge of Homer's *ODYSSEY*. And yes the movie *CITY SLICKERS* works perfectly well in isolation, but appreciation of that comic tale is more than doubled if you've ever seen *RED RIVER* upon which it is based. Likewise *WILD AT HEART* and its narrative template *THE WIZARD OF OZ*. And of course it's certainly much more fun watching *THE PLAYER* if you're a fan of old movies.

SAILOR: Too bad he couldn't visit that old Wizard of Oz, and get some good advice.

LULA: Too bad we all can't baby.

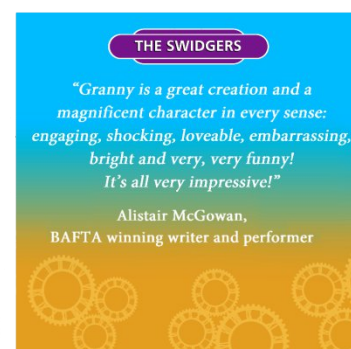
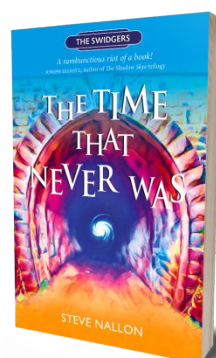
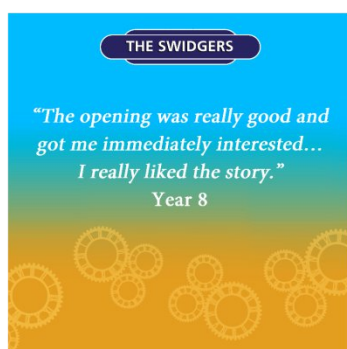
From *WILD AT HEART*, directed by David Lynch, with screenplay by David Lynch from the Barry Gifford novel *WILD AT HEART: THE STORY OF SAILOR AND LULA*



“Myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths.”
Joseph Campbell

Time Tales and their Underlying Myths and Stories

The Time Tale DARK is on occasion pure mythical infrastructure and the myth it is exploring is the biblical creation story of Adam and Eve (or Adam and Eva, as they are called in DARK). The difference is that in DARK, The Watchmaker, a God-like figure, makes a right mess of things and it is up to our contemporary Adam and Eva to create an alternative ‘paradise’ by their own self-sacrifice. In DARK, that paradise is the world that was there before The Watchmaker (God) interfered. DARK may have religious imagery and iconography running all the way through it, but it is, ironically, a distinctly secular fable. And one in which God/The Watchmaker doesn’t exactly come out smelling of roses.



A word here about the name of The Watchmaker, Heinrich Gustav Tannhauser. The term 'The Watchmaker' is an analogous expression for God, The Creator and it originates from the teleological case for the existence of God that is known as Intelligent Design argument. Our complex world, this reasoning goes, is like a watch that has been carefully constructed, and therefore, as with the watch, the world requires a Watchmaker or Designer/Creator. And The Watchmaker in DARK, by his actions in building a Time Machine, is the Creator of the two very nightmarish time loops in which Jonas finds himself. The H.G. initials of Heinrich Gustav Tannhauser are an obvious reference to H.G. Wells. *Tann* is a poetic German term for forest (woods feature heavily in DARK), and *hauser* simply means house. A JOURNEY THROUGH TIME is the name of the book written by the Tannhauser character in DARK and it features this blurb on the front cover: *'We trust in the linear, forever the same shape of the past, until eternity. But the differences between the past, presence and future are nothing but an illusion.'* The concept of Time as an illusion was made famous by Albert Einstein when he said: "For us believing physicists, the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion." And Albert Einstein, incidentally, said these words a few weeks before his death in 1955. In DARK, then words, names and references to other stories and traditions have all been carefully chosen to add depth and emotional resonance with layer upon layer of thought and meaning. More

symbol web perhaps than image system.

THE LAKE HOUSE is a remake of the South Korean film IL MARE and stars Keanu Reeves as Alex Wyler and Sandra Bullock as Kate Forster. It is a romance where two characters are separated across Time. ‘There could have never been two hearts so open, no tastes so similar, no feelings so in unison, no countenances so beloved. Now they were as strangers; nay, worse than strangers, for they could never become acquainted. It was a perpetual estrangement.’ Not a voice-over written to introduce the movie, but rather words from Jane Austen’s PERSUASION, also about two characters who eventually overcome their own barrier with the help of Time. Well, Time more in the sense of waiting and patience than a magical lake house and mail box.

“Folk tales and myths, they’ve lasted for a reason. We tell them over and over because we keep finding truths in them, and we keep finding life in them.”

Patrick Ness



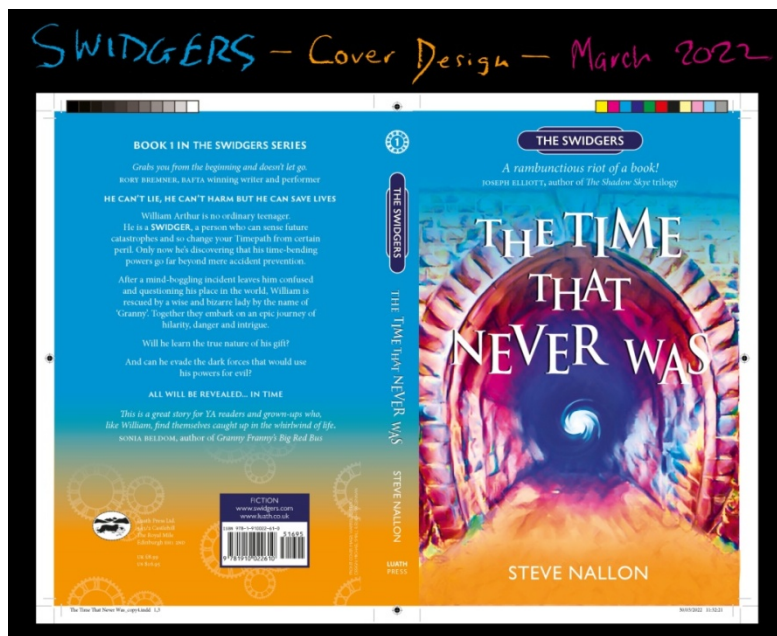
“It occurred to me that every work of art is a synecdoche, there’s no way around it. Every creative work that someone does can only

represent an aspect of the whole of something. I can't think of an exception to that."

Charlie Kaufman, director and screenwriter

Synecdoche and Metonym

Synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a part is substituted for the whole, for example, fifty *head* of cattle, meaning fifty cows or bulls. Metonymy is a particular kind of synecdoche in that it substitutes an attribute of a thing for that thing's proper name – for example, the *crown*, meaning the monarchy, or *the White House* or *Downing Street* referring to government. Where these ideas come into play in Story Craft is where a single action or place or person somehow stands in for, or represents, a greater whole.



Many places in stories are seen as standing in for or representing a whole. Martin Scorsese's 1995 movie CASINO and

Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel ROBINSON CRUSOE may not seem to have much in common, but both in their different ways are microcosms of capitalism. CASINO presents and represents capitalism in a negative light, ROBINSON CRUSOE, with the hero's hard-work-reaps-reward ethic, depicts the values of capitalism in a far more idealistic light.

The title of FIVE EASY PIECES comes from the fact that when Robert 'Bobby' Eroica Dupea (Jack Nicholson) was younger he only ever chose the easiest option when learning to play the piano. And this restrictive way of thinking ultimate became his attitude to life itself. And what we see in the story is that at any moment of crisis, when faced with difficult issues, Bobby simply takes the easiest option and runs away.

"The pen is mightier than the sword."

From Edward Bulwer Lytton's play CARDINAL RICHELIEU



"Symbolism exists to adorn and enrich, not to create a sense of artificial profundity. None of the bells and whistles are about story, all right? Only story is about story... Symbolism (and other

adornments, too) do serve a useful purpose, though – it's more than just chrome on the grille. It can serve as a focusing device for both you and your reader, helping to create a more unified and pleasing work. I think that, when you read your manuscript over (and when you talk it over), you'll see if symbolism, or the potential for it, exists. If it doesn't, leave well alone. If it does, however if it's clearly a part of the fossil you're working to unearth – go for it. Enhance it. You're a monkey if you don't."

Stephen King, ON WRITING

Story Trope Symbolism

A story trope is that element of a tale – be it plot, character attribute, device, action or image – that is so commonly used in certain types of stories that it becomes a convention and as a result often becomes an expectation of that genre. In the context of the image system, we are here specifically thinking of those story tropes images with both a literal and figurative meaning. For example, a bridge. A bridge rather obviously takes you from one place to another, but in Story making it across a bridge can suggest moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar, or, as Joseph Campbell would describe it, the transition for the Ordinary World to the Special World. You'll find characters crossing bridges at key story moments in RAIN MAN, BRIDGE OF SPIES, JURASSIC WORLD and STAND BY ME. The bridges in these tales aren't strictly speaking a metaphor, for

they are real bridges and they are there, but they do act subconsciously within the transformational nature of the tale.

Another story trope image is the use of mirror. Fairly obviously, the mirror comes into play at moments of reflection. If you wish to get psychological, you might even say that at such story moments the mirror symbolises the threshold between the conscious mind and the unconscious mind, and that by looking into a mirror, what you are really doing is staring into the depths of your unconsciousness and indeed your very soul.

The mirror can sometimes tell us a truth about ourselves, even if we don't want to know it – *'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?'* For many years, in answer to that question, the Queen hears her own name, but then one day, when the Queen grows old, the mirror replies *'Snow White'* and we all know what happens next. Mirrors are kind when you are young, but cruel with their truth when you grow old. For example, Ingmar Bergman's *WILD STRAWBERRIES* (1957) has a story moment where the professor lies in a forest and is forced to look into a mirror. At first the professor refuses – it's as if he's too afraid to face reality of his face – but then he relents and sees, reluctantly, the person he truly is.

But mirrors can be used in different stories in different way. For example, the 'reflection' that Travis Bickle sees in the 'Are-you-talking-to-me?' mirror scene in *TAXI DRIVER* is more about the person he aspires to be. In *INCEPTION*, a movie about using

dreaming to enter into the minds of others, while dreaming of Paris, Ariadne creates two gigantic mirrors and puts them one in front of the other, thus bringing about an infinite labyrinth of reflection and worlds within worlds. In YENTL the Streisand character looks into a mirror as she cuts her hair and transforms herself into her new identity, that is the young man Anshel.

“There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.”

Edith Wharton, novelist



THE SWIDGERS

According to Granny though, I was still 'a frame without a picture', and so it would be better, she said, if I went round the galleries by myself. One painting made me smile: 'Telemachus and Athena'. A young man being told what to do by a woman in armour.

Oh yes, I know how you feel, I thought.

From THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS

THE SWIDGERS – Image System

THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, book one in THE SWIDGERS Time Adventure book series, is a tale that centres on the relationship between William and his mentor Granny. In Homer's tale THE ODYSSEY Athena disguised herself as a man called Mentor, and it's from him/her that we get the term itself. There are then a few classical (and comic) references to THE ODYSSEY and Telemachus and Athena in THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, particularly when Granny takes William to The Royal Academy of Art.

As THE SWIDGERS is a time adventure there are also references to the work of H.G. Wells, for example, the first words William hears from Nurse Molly when he recovers in hospital are "The sleeper awakes" the title of a Wells novel, which features someone who

sleeps for two hundred and three years and finds himself in an unknown future. Most appropriate for young William.

SWIDGERS is also to some degree a fantasy and so there are allusions to various fairy tales such as *Rapunzel* and the *Man in the Moon* and references to giants and pixies. Notably all the images and metaphors used in the Old Coach Inn have a child-like perspective, which, without giving too much of the plot away, reflects the true nature and history of those who live in the Old Coach Inn. And in that stale and musty world of the Old Coach Inn there are various references to Death – for example, the gravestones in the embankment on William's arrival at the other side of the tunnel and Granny singing of *Nearer My God to Thee*, a hymn often associated with the dying and one which was said to have been heard as the *Titanic* sank. Again, without giving too much of the plot away, a reflection of a world that in many ways is already dead inside.

It's an obvious thing to say but image systems in everyday language are dependent on the world in which the character lives or was brought up in. Granny, for example, in SWIDGERS, tells William that her only education was Sunday School. Inevitable then many of her similes and metaphors come from Bible stories, with references to Moses and the tale of the burning bush, plus Daniel in the lion's den.

Some final thoughts on symbolism, metaphors and imagery...

“The poet, being an imitator like a painter or any other artist, must of necessity imitate one of three objects – things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be. The vehicle of expression is language - either current terms or, it may be, rare words or metaphors.”

Aristotle

“Symbolism is alright in 'fiction,' but I tell true life stories simply about what happened to people I knew.”

Jack Kerouac

“Postmodernism surely requires an even greater grasp of symbolism, as it's increasingly an art of gesture alone.”

Andrew Eldritch

“Metaphors have a way of holding the most truth in the least space.”

Orson Scott Card, American writer known best for his science fiction works

“The Greek tragic mask is one of my main metaphors for the role of the poet. The eyes of the tragic mask are always open to witness even the worst, and the mouth is always open to make poetry from it. Neither ever close.”

Tony Harrison,
English poet, translator and playwright

“Metaphors are much more tenacious than facts.”

Paul de Man, Belgian-born literary critic and literary theorist

“Trademarks are usually metaphors of one kind or another. And are, in a certain sense, thinking made visible.”

Saul Bass , American graphic designer and Oscar-winning filmmaker, best known for his design of motion-picture title sequences, film posters, and corporate logos

“Some say Hollywood movies that are made about boxing are just metaphors for other things, I think I’ve made one that’s actually about boxing and not a metaphor.”

Walter Hill, American film director, screenwriter, and producer known for his action films and revival of the Western genre

“Key metaphors help determine what and how we perceive and how we think about our perceptions.”

M. H. Abrams (Meyer Howard Abrams), American literary critic

By Steve Nallon



THE SWIDGERS