

"Plot exists so the character can discover for himself (and in the process revealed to the reader) what he, the character, is really like: plot forces the character to choice and action, transforms him from a static construct to a lifelike human being making choices and paying for them or reaping the rewards."
John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

"What's the plot?" we may ask a friend who's recommended a play. "It's about this prince whose father comes back as a ghost," the friend might reply. Yes, that's a situation certainly, but is it a plot? If the friend then says, "And then the ghost tells the young prince that he was murdered by the prince's uncle! The spirit then instructs the hero to revenge his 'foul and most unnatural murder.'" Now that *is* a plot. Why? Because from then on the prince has an action and duty to fulfil.

PLOT AND CHARACTER begins by looking at all aspects of structuring and then takes us through the essential elements that make up a plot, from catalyst event and inciting incident to crisis and climax. And along the way there are some interesting questions raised such as: *What exactly is the 'inciting incident' of the plot of IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE?*

PLOT AND CHARACTER then goes on to consider that perennial conundrum: *Which comes first, character or plot?* And following on from that there are detailed chapters on the Making of Character,

looking at how to build a character, the arc of the character, capacity to change, plus archetypes and psychology.

What is Structure? explores what is meant by 'structure', beginning with the many different metaphors people use. This chapter then considers the various ways of looking at what structure is, including story shapes, tripartite structure, the grand narrative and discourse/story. **PAGE 6**

Structuring and Planning examines some of the practical issues around structuring a story, including planning, openings and closings and midpoints. This chapter then goes on to consider the idea of the 'well-made play' and the legendary and controversial Edgar Wallace 'plot wheel'. **PAGE 30**

Practical Story Structure looks at the Tripartite Story Structure, various story theorists' ideas of structure, including George Abbott and Robert McKee, plus the concept of the Story Spine. **PAGE 48**

What Does a Plot Need to be a Plot? looks first at the essential requirements of a plot, namely the catalyst event, the inciting incident, causality, action/plan, protagonist/antagonist plus crisis and climax. **PAGE 62**

The Essentials of Plot – The Catalyst Event explores the disequilibrium or initial change in the status quo which often leads to the triggering of action. **PAGE 79**

The Essentials of Plot – The Inciting Incident looks in detail at the nature of the event which triggers the central action of the drama, and that is the inciting incident. **PAGE 102**

The Essentials of Plot – Protagonist and Antagonist considers the central dramatic players of any story, namely, the protagonist and the antagonist. **PAGE 122**

The Essentials of Plot – Causality looks at the story concept of events causing other events and the way the human mind makes such connections. **PAGE 134**

The Essentials of Plot – Action and Method examines the two key concepts that connect and drive the events of a tale, and they are causal linkage and the motivated dramatic action. This chapter also looks at the nature of the plan or method which is usually the means of the action itself. **PAGE 146**

The Essentials of Plot – Crisis considers exactly what we mean by crisis. Crisis is the low point or nadir of the tale, but it also often includes the protagonist facing some sort of dilemma or impossible choice. **PAGE 168**

The Essentials of Plot – Climax looks at the conclusion or apex of the story's dramatic action, namely the climax of the tale. **PAGE 187**

The Essentials of Plot – Closed Endings, Open Endings, Ambiguous Endings and Meta-fiction Endings considers different possible conclusions to the dramatic action, from those which are clear and irreversible, to those endings which are less absolute. This chapter also looks at how meta-fictional tales deal with the idea of the climax to dramatic action. **PAGE 197**

The Essentials of Plot – Anti-climax and *Deus ex Machina* explores what we mean by anti-climax, the different variations, and how an anti-climax isn't necessarily a bad thing. This chapter also looks at the *deus ex machina* ending and how that too can sometimes be used effectively and legitimately in Story. **PAGE 216**

The Essentials of Plot – Resolution considers the final element of plot and that is the 'wrap up' or Resolution. **PAGE 229**

The Essentials of Plot – Some Famous Last Lines offers a selection of closing lines from books, play and movies. **PAGE 240**

Quotes and Thoughts on Structure and Plot offers some thoughts on structure and dramatic construction from novelists, screenwriter and dramatists. **PAGE 247**

Which is More Important, Plot or Character? addresses that perennial question dating back to Aristotle, namely, *Which should be considered more key in the construction of a drama, plot or character?* **PAGE 254**

The Making of Character: The Basic Building Blocks looks first at traits, habits and attitudes in creating characters, and then moves on to consider the importance of psychological connection with a character. This chapter also explores the four levels of conflict, namely, inner, personal, extraneous and cosmic. **PAGE 266**

The Making of Character: Status, Duality and Interaction looks at the social status of the character, the duel nature of people and the importance of the four levels of conflict in developing a character. **PAGE 285**

The Making of Character: Basing Characters on Real People and Yourself examines how writers use themselves, their lived experience, plus their observations about those around them to create and invent characters. **PAGE 295**

The Making of Character: Archetypes considers what archetypes are and how it's possible to create and devise intriguing characters from such prototypes. **PAGE 310**

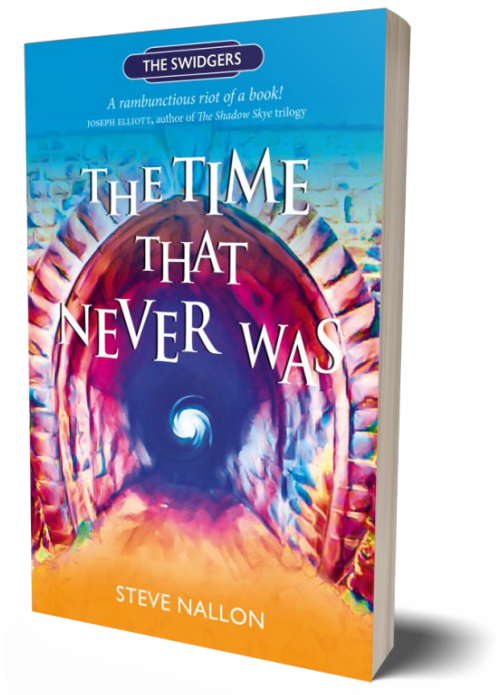
The Making of Character: The Arc of the Character examines a character's inner and outer 'journey' across the story. **PAGE 319**

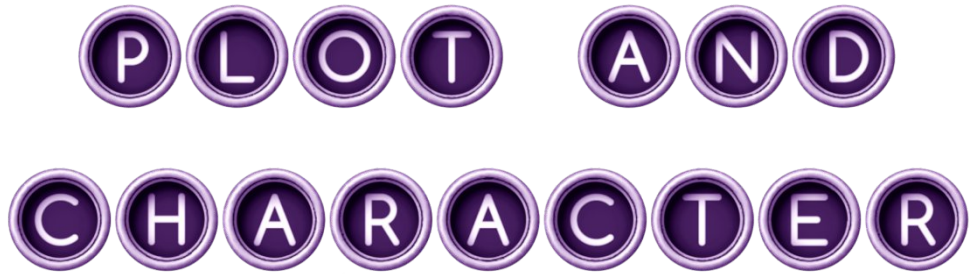
The Making of Character: Capacity to Change, Choosing Not to Change and Transformation Scenes looks at the importance of indicating a character's ability to develop, or not as the case may be, plus the various types of transformational scenes, especially those where change is integral to the dramatic action **PAGE 339**

The Making of Character: Psychology, Desires, Motivation, plus Conscious and Unconscious Wants looks primarily the motivational aspects of the action desire line. **PAGE 351**

The Making of Character: Thoughts from Writers on Creating Characters is a collection of quotations from selection of professional authors. **PAGE 378**

Plotting in *The Time That Never Was* and *A Christmas Carol* offers a deconstruction of the plot of THE SWIDGERS by the author, plus a breakdown of Dickens' Christmas classic into its fundamental Story elements. **PAGE 382**





What is Structure?

"The structure of a narrative is like the framework of girders that holds up a modern high-rise building: you can't see it, but it determines the edifice's shape and character."
David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION

The Metaphors of Story Structure

Structure has many metaphors. Scaffolding. Blueprint. Skeleton. Frame. Some even talk about 'the cup for your coffee', meaning 'the vessel (or from) into which you pour the content of your tale'. Roland Tobias, author of 20 MASTER PLOTS AND HOW TO BUILD THEM, suggests that we shouldn't separate content from form/structure. He thinks it's better to think in terms of the electromagnetism, binding atoms together, where content is the collection of atoms and structure is the force holding them in place.

In fact there are many analogies and metaphors for Story and how it works and functions. There is 'the washing line', where Story is the place upon which you hang your ideas of the world, 'the

suitcase', in which you smuggle your ideas, messages or morals. This is also known as the 'Green Channel' theory, where the customs officer says, 'What's in your bag?', and you reply 'Oh, it's just Story' – and so he lets you through believing it to be harmless nonsense.



Some metaphors for Story and its structure can be perceptive and insightful, but others are simply crass and dim-witted. But perhaps the reason there are so many metaphors and similes out there is because the idea of 'Story Structure' is hard to define and analogy is often your best option.

So which metaphor should we use? Here it might be useful to consider the etymology of the word 'text'. Text comes from the Latin *text* or 'woven', from the verb *texere* meaning 'to weave'. When we weave we are putting material together in an orderly and coherent fashion. And, if it's a good weave, we see and enjoy the pattern rather than how it was made. You might say then that Story Structure is 'a weave' of sorts, for structuring as far as Story is concerned, is the strategic selection and composition of events with

the purpose of expressing a view of the world – and in so doing arousing and creating a response from those who experience it.

"Time in a story does not move forward equally. I find it helpful to think of a necklace with various-size beads on it."
Donald M. Murray, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist



"Structure? Oh darling, it's just two or three little surprises followed every now and again by a bigger surprise."
Peggy Ramsay, a British Literary Agent

So How Useful is the Idea of Story Structure in Practice?

At worst story structure is a formula, a mechanism, a code, a paradigm, blueprint, boilerplate or template – a one-size fits all prescriptive and predictable writing-by-numbers self-assembly flat-pack that is way too schematic. Not surprisingly then, many writers view people offering the paint-it-by-numbers-story-kit as the worst type of snake-oil salesmen, for those who write stories know there is no magic elixir, Holy Grail or silver bullet.

Yet there are rules of sorts. David Mamet writes about them, as do Stephen King and John Gardner. Robert McKee, Linda Seger and John Truby have made careers lecturing on them. More importantly perhaps, the publishing and movie industries often live by them,

even if they don't always understand and appreciate what they do. The dramatist Ken Campbell used to say "every writer should be McKee-ed, but no commissioning editor should ever be let near him." However, Robert McKee's theories and everyone else's are now out of the bottle, and so if your narrative doesn't match the 'check list' with Inciting Incident in the right place or pivotal 'mid-point' scene then it's bottom of the slush pile or a rejection slip for you.

Many writers however don't like looking under the bonnet, as it were, to see how their story works. They act and write more on instinct, trusting their pen to be guided by their subconscious. They create, as some would say, 'by the seat of their pants'. That said, most writers know what they are doing, meaning most writers work to some sort of story strategy, and that strategy, even though it may be subconscious, often results in a narrative structure not that dissimilar to those advocated by the story gurus. After all, the compass of the mind can often be as reliable as the map on paper.

"The argument that one should know the rules in order to break them is only half the story. Playwrights should know the rules because they are in possession of the audience, their essential partner in the endeavour. They won't be thanked for sticking so closely to the rules that the play is predictable from start to finish. But nor will audiences readily accept their expectations being wilfully ignored."

David Edgar, HOW PLAYS WORK



"The engineers of the future will be poets."
Terence McKenna, American ethno-botanist and mystic

Narrative Choice

All stories have options as to the manner in which they can be presented, particularly in written fiction. Will the story be told as an objective narration, subject narration or even stream of consciousness? Will it be presented in first person, third person or even second person? Will it be written in present tense or past tense or a mixture of both? These questions don't apply quite in the same way for a dramatist writing for the theatre. Plays are nearly always 'in the moment' speeches of the characters right there in front of you. The same could be said too for radio and video games. That said, Shakespeare's PERICLES has a narrator of sorts called John Gower. The cinematic medium is a greyer area because the camera can be subjective or objective, plus it's not unusual in the movies to have a voice over. Anyway, the important point is that fiction by its nature tells and narrates and how this is achieved in each story is the result of carefully chosen options.

"Sometimes reality is too complex. Stories give it form."
Jean Luc Godard, film maker



"TRISTRAM SHANDY isn't a story with a main plot-line interrupted by digressions. It is a story of digressions interrupted by what appears to be a main plotline."
John Truby

Story Shapes

There are many ways of looking at 'Story Shapes'. First there is the idea of story shapes in a literal sense, in that the direction or outline of the story can actually be drawn on a blackboard. An example of this might be said to be the 'character arc' or 'story arc' which refers usually to the transformation of the character across the whole narrative. And then there are those story designs outlined by the story guru John Truby. Most stories are linear in that they feature a central protagonist with a single objective, creating a clear straight line of action. But there are others, for example the 'meander', which is more an aimless journey without a distinct

objective (FORREST GUMP, O LUCKY MAN!) and ‘branching’, where there are digressions into independent episodes or events (TRISTRAM SHANDY, ALICE’S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND). The Story Shape can also be ‘circular’, where you end up where you started (LA RONDE), a ‘spiral’, contracting inwards upon itself (BLOW UP, AFTER HOURS, VERTIGO), or even be an ‘explosion’ of seemingly simultaneous thought (NOT I). Then there are stories which have interlocking triangles (THE ODYSSEY) or many strands that interact (INTO THE WOODS). This is not to say that stories which have these types of story shapes don’t have inciting incidents or even climaxes, but rather that there is a distinctive narrative outline in the structure of the tale that differs from the traditional single linear line. In fact there are many ways of thinking about Story, including Joseph Campbell’s ‘*Journey of the Hero*’ in THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES (from the Ordinary World, the Call to Adventure right through to Resurrection and Return with the Elixir).

“The multi-strand plot is clearly a much more simultaneous form of storytelling, emphasising the group, or the mini-society, and how the characters compare.”
John Truby, THE ANATOMY OF STORY



"The Rising Movement. The action has been started; the chief persons have shown what they are; the interest has been awakened. Mood, passion, involution have received an impulse in a given direction."
Gustav Freytag, in DIE TECHNIK DES DRAMAS

Gustav Freytag's Pyramid

The German writer and novelist, Gustav Freytag (1816 – 1895), in DIE TECHNIK DES DRAMAS came up with the pyramid structure of rising and falling action. Freytag divided plot into five different parts consisting of 1) Exposition then Conflict, 2) Rising Action, 3) Climax, 4) Falling Action, and, ultimately, 5) Denouement or Resolution. This theory, because of its shape, became known as 'Gustav's Pyramid' and some people nowadays call it 'The Story Mountain'.



However, there are problems with Gustav Freytag's theory when looked at in more detail. First, exposition, or story information, isn't something that is there just at the start of the story, for story information should be spread throughout a plot so that when certain facts are revealed they have a dramatic impact. Think here of one of

the most famous misquotes in cinema history from THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK when Luke's true identity comes to light: "Luke, I am your father." In fact, Darth Vader's actual line is "No, I am your father" but the point is that what Darth Vader says is still expositional story information – and it comes not at the start of the first movie but almost at the end of the second!



Another problem is Gustav Freytag's theory which can lead to confusion is the question *What is meant by 'Falling Action'?* If the story's action is to achieve the goal and the climax does exactly that, then surely the action in that sense has come to an end? Rising action and falling action are neat terms but falling action seems an odd thing to call that which comes after the climax. Freytag's alternative term to Rising Action was The Return, which does make more sense. Anyway, this is how Freytag described Falling Action (or The Return):

> The most difficult part of the drama is the sequence of scenes in the downward movement, or as if may well be called, the Return; specially in powerful plays in which the heroes are the directing force, do these dangers enter most.

> Up to the climax, the interest has been firmly fixed in the direction in which the chief characters are moving. After the deed is consummated, a pause ensues. Suspense must now be excited in what is new. For this, new forces, perhaps new roles must be introduced, in which the hearer is to acquire interest. On account of this, there is already danger in distraction and the breaking up of scenic effects. And yet, it must be added, the hostility of the counter-party toward the hero cannot always be easily concentrated in one person, nor in one situation; sometimes it is necessary to show how frequently, now and again, it beats upon the soul of the hero; and in this way, in contrast with the unity and firm advance of the first half of the play, the second, may be ruptured, in many parts, restless; this is particularly the case with historical subjects, where it is most difficult to compose the counter-party of a few characters only.
> And yet the return demands a strong bringing out and intensifying of the scenic effects, on account of the satisfaction already accorded the hearer, and on account of the greater significance of the struggle."

Freytag's point that you don't want the dramatic energy to sag is a fair one, but realistically how many dramas or novels bring in new roles and new forces into the drama after the climax? As for the hostility of other forces of antagonism other than the central antagonist, well, those sort of loose ends are nowadays covered by what most people would refer to as the resolution.

A further concern with Gustav Freytag's theory is that the 'pyramid' or 'mountain' shape, with the apex in the middle, can be misleading when drawn on whiteboard because that isn't how a

story works or would look like if set out across its time duration as a dynamic action outline.

"The first law, that of unity, admits of still another application to the characters: The drama must have only one chief hero about all whom the person, however great their number, arrange themselves in different gradations. The drama has a thoroughly monarchic arrangement the unity of its action is essentially dependent on this, that this action is perfected about one dominant character. But also for a sure effect, the first condition is that the interest of the spectator muse be directed mostly toward one person, and he must lean as early as possible who is to occupy his attention before all other character. Since the highest dramatic processes but few person can be exhibited in broad elaboration, the number of great roles is limited to a few; and it is common experience that nothing is more painful to the hearer than the uncertainty as to what interest he should give to each of these important persons. It is also one practical advantage of the piece to direct its effects toward a single middle point. Whoever deviates from this fundamental law must do so with the keen perception that he surrenders a great advantage; and if his subject matter makes this surrender necessary, he must, in doubt, ask himself whether the uncertainty thus arising in the effects will be counterbalanced by other dramatic advantages."

Gustav Freytag, in DIE TECHNIK DES DRAMAS



"Narrative is basically a sequence of events. Something happens, then something else, then something else. Human instinct compels us to stick around to see what happens next."
Ira Glass, American radio presenter

Story Units

Stories are built of units. The smallest unit of story is the story 'beat', and beyond that there are lines, exchanges, scenes and acts, or, in the case of the novel, paragraphs and chapters. And when we are talking about 'acts' we are not just referring to plays in a theatre, for many screenwriting gurus break down movies into acts. Indeed some filmmakers still use a traditional fade to indicate when one act ends and another begins.

And while we're talking about acts it's worth mentioning Horace's design of the five-act structure in his ARS POETICA written around 19 BC and the dominance of the three act structure in plays from the Victorian era up until around the 1950s.

"There's this inherent screenplay structure that everyone seems to be stuck on, this three-act thing. It doesn't interest me. I actually think I'm probably more interested in structure than most people who write screenplays, because I think about it."
Charlie Kaufman, American playwright, film producer, theatre and film director



Some more thoughts on what you might call story units…

"A scene is a unit of dramatic action taking place in a single space in continuous time, in which something changes. At this point, I should perhaps say but there is a famous dictum about scenes by Robert McKee. He says that for something to count as a scene, it has to contain a turning point from positive to negative, or vice versa. I prefer to use the idea that something has to change, which for me is less restrictive, and can be broader and subtler than the idea of a turning point."

Stephen Jeffreys, PLAYWRITING: STRUCTURE, CHARACTER, HOW AND WHAT TO WRITE

"We ought to think for a moment about the paragraph, the form of organisation which comes after the sentence… In fiction, the paragraph is less structured – it's the beat instead of the actual melody… I would argue that the paragraph, not the sentence, is the basic unit of writing – the place where coherence begins and words stand a chance of becoming more than mere words."

Stephen King, ON WRITING

"Many Victorian novels were originally published in part or serial form, either as independent soft-cover publications or in magazines, and this too affected the shape of the eventual novel."

David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)

"A scene is composed of the three elements: what the characters say (dialogue); what the characters do (stage directions); and how the characters think and feel (subtext)."
Stephen Jeffreys, PLAYWRITING: STRUCTURE, CHARACTER, HOW AND WHAT TO WRITE



"'Form' implies the existence of that which is not form – i.e. content. But there can be no content without a container – i.e. without a form. In practice all criticism makes a distinction between form and content in that any critical interpretation of a text is an effort to express the meaning of the text in different words from those of the author, though the discovery criticism always makes is that this is not possible. The point to be emphasised is that content does not proceed form in literature, but it is discovered <u>in</u> form. The form of a text is the trace of the choices and exclusions made by the writer in the process of discovering what it was he had to say."
David Lodge, university notes FORM IN FICTION (1980)

Form, Content and the Structure of 'Discourse'

Form is one of the most difficult words in critical theory because no one ever quite pins down what it means. And worse, if they try, you discover that the definition of 'form' they have been using is entirely different from the one you assumed it was. It's as if you were having a conversation about a visit to the zoo and half way through your chat, the words 'elephant' and 'giraffe' somehow

swapped meanings. You may nod away politely about the elephants long neck but inwardly you are in a state of utter confusion.

For some, as well, form means genre. They might say '*It's really a tragic-comedy rather than a traditional comedy. I mean, a proper 'comedy', well, that's a completely different form.*' For others a work's form means it's structure and they might say '*PULP FICTION is put together in such as way that its timeline isn't what you think it is. It's structure in a non-traditional form.*' To make things even more confusing artists and painters will have their way of defining form, as will musicians.

So what is form? Form as it is used here could be said to be the singular and central concept determining *how* a work is communicated or presented ('form' in fact comes from the Latin *forma* meaning 'idea'). David Lodge's observation that content does not proceed form in literature, but is discovered *in* form is an important reminder that however you define form, separating it from content isn't that easy. Elsewhere in his notes on FORM IN FICTION, David Lodge makes an important point about story and discourse, where discourse is, roughly speaking, how the work is communicated and presented. Lodge says:

> Formal analysis of narrative, then, is concerned with the differences between the story and the imitation of it in discourse – but we must remember that in the case of fiction (as distinct from history) the story has no proper existence prior to the composition of the text, and is an

> extrapolation from the finished text. This is true even when there are known biographical sources for the novel.

His point is that when we talk about the difference between story and discourse or story and plot there is no such 'thing' that is Story because we as readers or viewers or listeners have to create the story's Story for ourselves.



Discourse, as David Lodge uses it, is a term specific to structuralism, which in the mid-twentieth century became a method of analysis developed linguistics that then made its way into anthropological study and literary criticism. It's an idea that comes from the Russian Formalists where *fabula* is the raw material of a story, and *sjuzet* is the way that material is organised and structured. It's essentially the difference between story and plot, except that it's an idea that applies mainly to stories that are told. The actual *design* of narrative fiction in other words.

It should be said before considering the idea of narrative design that although it is primarily a way of looking at written or narrative fiction its principles can, and often are, also applied to the cinema.

But less so the theatre. And that's simply because theatre is pure *show* (in the sense that usually all there is to see and hear from a story point of view are the speeches of characters) and very little *tell* (in the sense that fiction uses narrative description throughout to communicate its story). This is an observation incidentally that goes right back to Plato's REPUBLIC, where in Book III Socrates distinguishes between *mimesis* (where the poet imitates the speech of a character) and *diegesis* (pure narrative description where the poet speaks in his own voice). Thus in the Greek world three ways of presenting a Story emerged: pure *diegesis*, in which the poet spoke exclusively in his own words, exemplified by the lyric poem; pure *mimesis*, in which the poet spoke only in the imitated voices of characters, as exemplified in drama in both comedy and tragedy; and a mixture of *diegesis* and *mimesis* as found in the epics of Homer such as THE ILIAD and THE ODYSSEY. You could say then that in some ways the novel is a development from the epic.

David Lodge in his university notes FORM IN FICTION further points out that fiction by its nature has to be, as he puts it, fundamentally diegetic:

> In a novel everything that is not dialogue is *diegesis*, the report of a narrator, 'the poet himself', however impersonal. The only way of getting round this rule is to put the narrating entirely in the hands (or mouth) of a character, or several characters, as in the pseudo-autobiographical confessional novel or the epistolary novel, or the dramatic monologue. In these narrative forms the writer avoids

> telling the story in his own voice by imitating someone else telling the story: a *mimesis* of a *diegesis*. But the narration narrative is still, inevitably, mainly diagetic, though at a second remove.

That said, Evelyn Waugh has whole scenes in his novels that are all in direct speech, without even a 'he said' or a 'she said'. And even theatre sometimes has a narrator, as in Shakespeare's PERICLES with the choric character of John Gower.

The importance of all this from a 'structure' point of view is that there is Story on the one hand and there is Discourse (or Narrative Design, as we would describe it) on the other and to turn one into the other involves structural constructions. After all, it should be remembered that structuralism wasn't called structuralism for nothing.



Some more thoughts on structuralism…

"I hate intellectual discussion. When I hear the words 'phenomenology' or 'structuralism', I reach for my buck knife.
Edward Abbey, American author, essayist and environmental activist

"We do not need French post-structuralism, whose pedantic jargon, clumsy convolutions, and prissy abstractions have spread throughout academe and the arts and are now blighting the most promising minds of the next generation."
Camille Paglia, American feminist academic and social critic

"I studied Comparative Literature at Cornell. Structuralism was real big then. The idea of reading and writing as being this language game. There's a lot of appeal to that. It's nice to think of it as this playful kind of thing. But I think that another way to look at it is "Look, I just want to be sincere. I want to write something and make you feel something and maybe you will go out and do something."
William T. Vollmann, American novelist, journalist, war correspondent, short story writer and essayist



"The distinction between Story and Discourse was first formulated by Russian Formalist critics in the early decades of the twentieth-century, who used the terms 'fabula' and 'sjuzet'. The same basic distinction was adopted and explored by several French critics in the 60s and 70s, notably Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette, with, unfortunately, a confusing inconsistency of terms. 'Fabula' and 'sjuzet' are sometimes translated into English as Story and Plot, but we have preferred Seymour Chapman's terms Story and Discourse (STORY AND DISCOURSE: NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN FICTION AND FILM (1978)). 'Fabula' – the Story as it would have been enacted in reality in real time and space, as

distinct from the actual text or Discourse in which that Story is represented, with all the inevitable gaps, elisions, emphases and distortions involved in such a process."
David Lodge, university notes FORM IN FICTION (1980)

The Russian Formalists

In narrative theory, *fabula* refers to the chronological sequence of events in a narrative, *sjuzet* is the re-presentation of those events (through narration, metaphor, the re-ordering of the temporal sequence, and so on). In film theory, that re-presenting would also include camera angles, framing and editing. The terms *fabula* and *sjuzet* (sometimes spelt *syuzhet*) were originated by Vladimir Propp and Viktor Shklovsky as part of the Russian Formalism movement in the early twentieth-century, and they are essentially equivalent to the difference between story and discourse in structuralist theory.

Fabula then equates to all the events of a story and everything that you know happens in the tale. S*juzet* relates to the structuring of those events and the way what happened is presented. In other words, *fabula* is what *is* and *sjuzet* is how that *is* is re-presented. The difference between the two is close to that between story and plot, except that what we are talking about here is *telling*. And that is an idea that primarily applies to books and written fiction. It can also to a degree be applied to cinema and film but rarely to theatre as the stage is usually pure showing.



It should be said as a word of warning here that narratology and the world of academia love their terminology. And just to make it that little bit more difficult for everyone to understand, academics come up with their own individual jargon. Here, for the record, are some of the major players, each with their own way of putting things in terms of *fabula* and *sjuzet*: Tzvetan Todorov (*histoire* and *discours*); Roland Barthes (*récit* and *narration*); Gérard Genette (histoire and *récit* – the 'text' itself, plus narration – the act of narration which produces the text) and Seymour Chatman (*story* and *discourse*).

Some more thoughts on *fabula and sjuzet,* the Russian Formalists and even Russia itself…

"Aristotle himself defines 'action' as a progression, its necessary wholeness consisting in its having a beginning, a middle and an end. For me, an action is the formula which transforms 'fabula' into 'szujet', providing the principles by which the story is structured into a plot. Or, put the other way around, the plot is the way the story is presented dramatically in order to reveal an action."

David Edgar, HOW PLAYS WORK

"In film criticism of a formalist-structuralist type, 'diegesis' is often used to donate the Story ('fabula') of a narrative film. This is understandable, because film, like drama (indeed, more so) is an inherently is an inherently mimetic medium, in which words are only used to imitate words, actions to imitate actions etc. etc. Thus the relationship of the film 'discourse' to a verbal summary of its Story corresponds to the relationship between mimesis and diegesis. But in this sense diegesis is logically prior to and quite distinct from the narrative discourse which is then a mimesis of it."
David Lodge, university notes FORM IN FICTION (1980)

"Apropo de digresiuni. La Fielding, în JOSEPH ANDREWS, există un capitol, introdus după o descriere de încăierare. Capitolul cuprinde relatarea discuției dintre scriitor și actor și poartă următorul titlu: Introdus anume pentru a frâna acțiunea."
Viktor Borisovich Shklovsky

"I took a speed-reading course and read WAR AND PEACE in twenty minutes. It's about Russia."
Woody Allen



"The story-stuff (let us call it the Story of EMMA) as represented in a bare summary, could have been given various narrative forms. It might have been told retrospectively from the point of Emma's marriage to Knightley, for instance; or narrated by Emma herself in the first person; or narrated in the third person from Jane Fairfax's point of view. Any of these, and other possible, variations in narrative method would obviously have changed the novel. The 'meaning' of EMMA is therefore the result of innumerable

conscious and intuitive formal choices by Jane Austen, at every level of composition from the selection of each word to the overall structure of the narrative."
David Lodge's university notes FORM IN FICTION (1980)

Narrative Design

What do people mean when they talk about 'narrative design'? Well, if story is all the events in chronological order and plot is the rearrangement of those events in time and in a causal manner, then narrative design is the mode of presentation of what it was that occurred. Or put another way, if story is everything that happened and plot is the why, when and when, then narrative design is how that tale will be communicated.

Essentially then, narrative design covers the options around how a tale is told, who tells it and the way they tell it. What we are talking about here are choices. *Narrative* choices. From whose perspective is the tale told? What sort of narrative voice do they have? Is it, for example, an objective narration, a subject narration or stream of consciousness? Is the tale told in first person, third person or even second person? Is it written in present tense or past tense or a mixture of both? Are events imparted through letters or emails or direct speech? E.M. Forster said that 'the king died and then the queen died' is a story but 'the king died and then the queen died of grief' is a plot. However, he didn't say *how that tale should be told*. From the perspective of their son, the prince, or their daughter, the

princess? Or even perhaps the point of view of the court jester? Those would come under *narrative choice* and so be part of Narrative Design.

Some more thoughts on design…

"The alternative to good design is always bad design. There is no such thing as no design."
Adam Judge, author

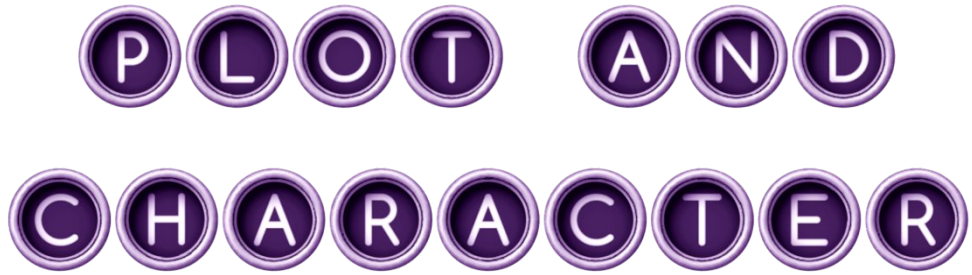
"Design is intelligence made visible."
Alina Wheeler, author

"Design is not a single object or dimension. Design is messy and complex."
Natasha Jen, designer and educator

"A designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away."
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, French writer and poet

"Good design is good business."
Thomas Watson Jr., businessman and second president of IBM





Structuring and Planning

"The structure of a play is always the story of how the birds came home to roost."
Arthur Miller, playwright

What's the Difference between Story and Plot?

In his series of lectures on the novel, E.M. Forster defined a story as "a narrative of events in their time-sequence." In other words, 'Story' is what happened in chronological order. However, 'Plot' is different, because Plot doesn't necessarily reveal what happens in time order – and in fact it rarely does. In a whodunit, for example, you wouldn't want to know who the murderer was at the time the murder was being committed. The point of a whodunit is to discover the culprit – and you have to wait for the detective to work that out by putting all the pieces together.

In his lectures on the novel, E.M. Forster added this: "'The king died and then the queen died' is a story. 'The king dies, and then the queen died of grief' is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it."

The point here is that ‘The king died and then the queen died’ is a simple statement of fact, one thing happened and then another thing happened. But when you say ‘The king died, and then the queen died of grief’ you are constructing a relationship between one and the other. You are in effect making one a direct consequence of the other. And so causality, or causally linked events, where one thing happens because of whatever came before it, is one of the key requirement of plot.



Another way to consider the difference between story and plot is to think of story as the raw material and plot as the way that material is organised and structured. In other words, story is everything that occurred, whereas plot – or rather and more accurately plotting – is how that ‘everything’ is then connected and motivated – in other words, the why, when and when. Think perhaps of story as all statements and plot as the questions those statements raise as well as the answers to them. And in this way of thinking, if a large pile of bricks and several barrels of cement is the

story, the construction of the house would be the ‘plotting’ and the final building itself would be the ‘plot’.

“I lost the plot for a while then. And I lost the sub-plot, the script, the soundtrack, the intermission, my popcorn, the credits, and the exit sign.”
Nick Hornby



“Of the total creative effort represented in a finished work, seventy-five percent or more of a writer’s labour goes into designing story. Who are these characters? What do they want? Why do they want it? How do they go about getting it? What stops them? What are the consequences? Finding the answers to these grand questions and shaping them into story is our overwhelming creative task… But the love of a good story, of terrific characters and a world driven by your passion, courage, and creative gifts is still not enough. Your goal must be a good story well told.”
Robert McKee

To Plan or Not to Plan, That is the Question

Some writers plan it all out to the last detail, while others, as it were, ‘go with the flow’. The former method is essential in writing farce, mystery stories, whodunits and the like. However, where plays or stories are based more on situations than plots, as in Noël

Coward's PRIVATE LIVES and DESIGN FOR LIVING, it's certainly possible to image Coward sketching out a few notes but then simply getting his fingers on that typewriter and seeing what happens. But of course we can't all be Noël Coward.

Charles Dickens created many of his stories while walking. And brisk steps were his style. Sometimes these walks would last much of the day. Dickens would then come home and sketch out the basic story structure. Some of Dickens' chapter breakdowns have survived and they are often very detailed. Dickens wrote in longhand – typewriters were not commercially until after Dickens' death – and the original manuscripts show many cuts, alterations, additions and corrections.

Although most writers usually have a structural shape in mind and are aware of the central motivations of their characters, much is written almost unconsciously. Ideas come overnight, or more often in the middle of the night. And in terms of theme writers often only realise what it is they have been writing about after they've done it. It's when it's re-read and ultimately re-drafted that what it's actually about becomes clear and apparent. And it is then that the writer has the opportunity to heighten and enhance those ideas and make even more pertinent to the story world they've created. As Arthur Miller once said, "When I discover what a play is about, I then type out in a sentence what it is about, pin that sentence to my typewriter, and make sure that everything is now about that."

Some more thoughts on planning or not planning…

"I always have a basic plot outline, but I like to leave some things to be decided while I write."
J.K. Rowling

"A few writers of established reputation and long experience opt to go directly into script form. Most, however, find it pays to write a full treatment. A few may indulge in a preliminary process, especially when working in tandem – they will construct a 'step outline'. The step outline, a very useful operation, consists of a numbered series of sentences or short paragraphs which describe a sequence by sequence development of the script's basic story line, as well as its sub-plot."
Edward Dmytryk, ON SCREEN WRITING

"Get the story structure in shape before starting to write the script. You must at least know the beginning, the middle and how it ends. Approximately, at least."
Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

"The first sentence can't be written until the final sentence is written."
Joyce Carol Oates, American writer who has had fifty-eight novels, a number of plays and many volumes of short stories and poetry published

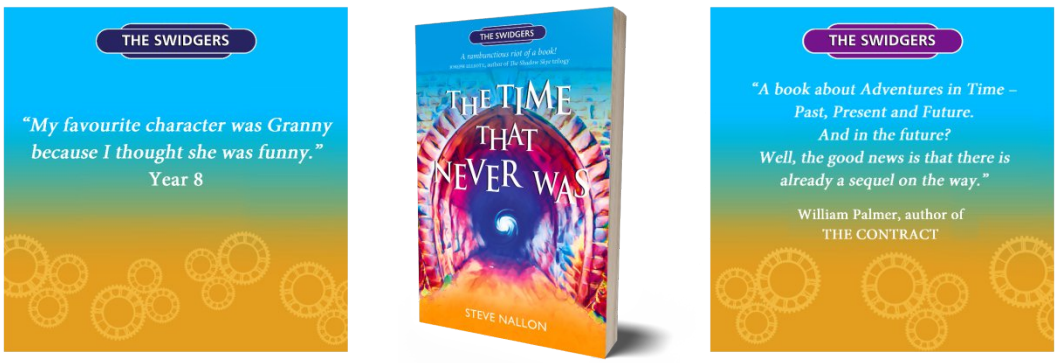
[On the subject of a full treatment] "It is one of the anomalies of the 'movie business' that at this stage the screenwriter, whose techniques are quite different from those of the novelist, should find it advantageous to write like one."
Edward Dmytryk, ON SCREEN WRITING



"Think of your story as a piece of thread. Where you cut in is the point at which the lights come up on Act One. Where you cut out will be your final curtain. (There may be a knot or two in the middle to denote the intervals, too.)"
Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

Starting and Stopping

When story gurus talk about 'beginnings' and 'ends' they are not usually referring to the opening scene or the last page. What they mean, often as not, is the launch and conclusion of the action of the story. However, where you start and where you stop, whether it be the first line of your novel or final image of your screenplay, is essential to your structure too.



The structure can be circular, stopping in some way how or where you started. A question can start your story and a question

can even be the final moment of your tale. Equally it can be humorous, reflective or moralising. Or a surprise cliff-hanger.

The *Swidgers* Time Adventure series is a continuing story in three parts. Book one stops but it doesn't end, because there are still books two and three to go. Yet the first in the series does still have a complete action in that William discovers the secret of the Old Coach Inn which then results in a cliff-edge battle for control of its future and those who live there.

Some more thoughts and examples of starting and stopping…

"OEDIPUS REX demonstrates, in one of its purest forms, the effect of starting late. This strategy works – it only works, in fact – when it involves 'the past coming to life in the present and creating drama' (as Arthur Miller's playwriting tutor Kenneth Rowe taught him)."
David Edgar in HOW PLAYS WORK

'Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the western spiral arm of the Galaxy lies a small unregarded yellow sun. Orbiting this at a distance of roughly ninety-two million miles is an utterly insignificant little blue green planet whose ape-descended life forms are so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea.'
The opening lines of Douglas Adams' novel THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY (1979)

'I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before.'

The closing lines of Mark Twain's ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN (1884)

'All children, except one, grow up. They soon know that they will grow up, and the way Wendy knew was this. One day when she was two years old she was playing in a garden, and she plucked another flower and ran with it to her mother. I suppose she must have looked rather delightful, for Mrs. Darling put her hand to her heart and cried, "Oh, why can't you remain like this for ever!"'
The opening lines to J.M. Barrie's novel PETER AND WENDY (1911) based on his play PETER PAN (1904)

"He was soon borne away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance."
The last line of Mary SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN; OR, THE MODERN PROMETHEUS (1818)

'The sweat wis lashing oafay Sick Boy; he wis trembling.'
The opening line of Irvine Welsh's TRAINSPOTTING (1993)

'"After all, tomorrow is another day."'
The last line of Margaret Mitchell's GONE WITH THE WIND (1936)

"Entropy is one of the most interesting aspects of our life as a whole. We are born, certain things happen, and we die. The sexual act is a perfectly good example. Things are called into motion that did not heretofore exist and that demand some form of resolution… and when it's resolved, the life, the sexual act, the play, is done. That's how you know when it's time to go home"
David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM



"The midpoint scene occurs just where you'd expect it – about halfway through the script. Syd Field, in THE SCREENWRITER'S WORKBOOK, says that it divides the story in half, introducing an event or line of dialogue that helps structure Act Two. In my work consulting on more than two thousand scripts and teaching many of the best films, I don't find a midpoint scene in every film. But when I do find one, it functions as an excellent tool to help structure a difficult second act."

Linda Seger, MAKING A GOOD SCRIPT GREAT

'Midpoints' and 'Book Ends'

In recent years there has been a trend towards creating stories with 'mirroring' openings and closings, so that the story journey concludes in some way where it began. A circular structure that is 'book-ended', if you will. Another modern vogue is to stress the importance of the pivotal 'midpoint' in the narrative. As John Yorke says in his book INTO THE WOODS, "Occurring almost exactly halfway through any successful story, the midpoint is the moment something profoundly significant occurs." This story theory, as Linda Seger points out, goes back to Sid Field.



What you can say is that both midpoints and book ends offer a certain neatness to a story's structure, and there's no doubt they work, but they should never be prescriptive, for not every story is shaped like that. Besides, what happens to the midpoint when you cut two scenes in the first half screenplay or even a whole chapter in the second half of your novel. The midpoint changes, and so does that mean it's now wrong and, like a child playing with weights on scales, you have to keep rebalancing the script to keep your precious midpoint in the right place? As for the fashion for the circular story structure, which is particularly prevalent on weekend novel writing courses, yes, it works for many stories but should you have to fabricate book ends just because a story guru says so?

"I actually think I'm probably more interested in structure than most people who write screenplays, because I think about it."
Charlie Kaufman, film director



"Dialogue. This, for me, is the fun part, and the reward for all the previous hard work. But as my late grandmother used to say, don't start on the pudding till you've eaten the main course.
Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

So When Do You Put in the Dialogue?

Many writers do a detailed scene breakdown, sometimes describing the actions and incidents moment by moment before they ever attempt to put in the dialogue. This is particularly true of playwrights and screenwriters. As Alan Ayckbourn says in his book THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING, if you start writing dialogue before any proper preparations "you'll be like an upholsterer trying to cover a piece of furniture which hasn't yet been with designed, let alone built."

That said, some writers prefer, as it were, to put oil straight on canvas, and start writing dialogue and character exchanges straight away and then develop the narrative from these green shoots of ideas. There's no one method that all writers share. The danger, however, with writing dialogue – which can take time and effort – is that the writer becomes so tied to it, they become reluctant to cut it later.

"The screenplay is the child not only of its mother, the silent film, but also of its father, the drama."
Terrence Rattigan, playwright and screenwriter



"First learn to be a craftsman; it won't keep you from being a genius."
Ferdinand Victor Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), French Romantic artist

The Well-made Play

A word here about Eugene Scribe (1791-1861) who came up with the concept of the *pièce bien faite* or the so-called well-made play. The well-made play, like those classicists such as Racine who took Aristotle's 'rules' as a blueprint for all tragedies, insists on certain strict dramatic and, arguably, artificial technical principles. For example, in one type of plot in a well-made play there would be a build-up of suspense from a misunderstanding that leads eventually to a climactic scene in which all problems are resolved. Not surprisingly, later critics and dramatists derided Scribe's work for prioritising the mechanics of playmaking over the reality of character and motivation, though some writers, notably Arthur Pinero, and more recently Terence Rattigan, have used Scribe's technique to great effect. Rattigan in particular, for examples, is one of the great maters of exposition.

And it might be worth mentioning in the context of the well-made play that the word is play*wright* and not play*writer*, for 'wright'

comes from the Old English *wryhta*, meaning ‘maker’. And so you might say that that which is made should at least be made well.

“Dramatic structure is not an arbitrary – or even a conscious – invention. It is an organic codification of the human mechanism for ordering information. Event, elaboration, dénouement; thesis, antithesis thesis; boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl; act one, two, three.”
David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE



‘There you are, Ariadne,’ said Robin. ‘The whole plot of your next novel presented to you. All you’ll have to do is work in a few false clues, and – of course – do the actual writing.’
From MRS MCGINTY’S DEAD by Agatha Christie

‘The Edgar Wallace Plot Wheel’ – Fact or Fiction?

When Stephen King was asked in an interview whether he used modern scriptwriting software he replied, “Nah. Plot software is just a high-tech version of Edgar Wallace’s plot wheel, invented in the 20s. I use what comes out of my head, or what I see happening around me.” The Edgar Wallace Plot Wheel in fact features in King’s short story “Dolan’s Cadillac” and King also wrote about it in his

fascinating memoire ON WRITING (2000). But did the Edgar Wallace Plot Wheel actually exist or it is just another ‘tall tale’ or ‘urban myth’? Well, the answer seems to be ‘Yes’ and ‘No’.

Richard Horatio Edgar Wallace (1 April 1875 – 10 February 1932) was a British writer who was born illegitimate and into poverty in Victorian London. Wallace left school at the age of twelve, joined the army at twenty-one and later became a war correspondent during the Boer War for the Daily Mail. With a great deal of life experience behind him but also in considerable debt, Wallace returned to London from South Africa and began scribbling a few thrillers to make a bit of quick money. However, these were so successful that he went on to make a career out of his stories, writing around one hundred-and-seventy novels, nearly a thousand short stories and numerous stage works and screenplays. In total, Wallace sold over fifty million copies of his combined works in various editions. In fact, Wallace was so prolific it became a standing joke that if a friend telephoned him and was told Edgar was writing a novel, the friend would simply reply, “Oh that’s okay, I’ll stay on the line till he’s finished!”

But what of that plot wheel?

What can be said of Edgar Wallace is that by using variations and combinations of essentially the same plot twists and turns, he kept his readers rapt – and did so for many decades – but there was probably no ‘Plot Wheel’ as such. For that we have to look to Erle

Stanley Gardner, the writer of the Perry Mason stories (Erle Stanley Gardner, incidentally, was no relation to the novelist John Gardner, author of ON BECOMING A NOVELIST.) And here there is some evidence of actual Plot Wheels, for Erle Stanley Gardner had a compendium of a 'Wheel of Blind Trials', a 'Wheel of Hostile Minor Characters', a 'Wheel of Solutions', and a 'Wheel of Complicating Circumstances'. However, what changes every week in the Perry Mason stories is the psychological nature and motivation of the characters.



Those who are fans of COLUMBO soon begin to recognise the similarity of certain plot scenarios and moments, particularly the way Columbo eventually proves the murderer did it. Sometimes it's physical evidence putting the killer at the scene of the crime, other times it's the manner in which Columbo tricks the murderer into giving himself away. There are episodes where the perfect alibi is broken by something extraneous in the timeline, plus plot lines where the person murdered left behind incriminating evidence to convict their killer. There are variations where Columbo intentionally

arrests someone close to the murderer, thereby putting emotional pressure on the real killer to confess, and stories too when a murder can't be proved until the body is found and so Columbo has to trick the murderer into revealing it. It's never quite the same, but, as with Edgar Wallace and Erle Stanley Gardner, there are repeating story tropes. That said, the true joy of COLUMBO for fans is the detective's ramshackle and seemingly unassuming character and the way he gets under the skin of each killer. Human beings are infinitely different, we each have our own psychology, so even if the series has a Plot Wheel of sorts, it's the relationship between the cat and the mouse that ultimately makes COLUMBO such an evergreen favourite.

"George M. Cohan fixed what he correctly understood to be a first act deficient in interest by having the hero enter, remove a pistol from his coat, look around to make sure he was un observed, and put the pistol in a bureau drawer."
Stephen King



Some more thoughts on structure…

"Character is a metaphor for a human being and story is metaphor for life."

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

"The bricks are the same in all building, but not all buildings are the same."
Ennio Morricone, composer

"Actors talk about the 'arc of the film' or the 'arc of the performance'. It doesn't exist on stage. It's not there. The performance takes care of both. The 'arc of the performance,' the act of controlling, of doling out emotion here and withholding emotion there, just doesn't exist."
David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM

"Life is chaotic and meaningless, and you have to find your meaning. You must find the answer, you can't just live. That's the point of story: helping you find your meaning in life."
Robert McKee

"He who combines the useful and the pleasing wins out by both instructing and delighting the reader."
Horace, EPISTOLAS AD PISONES DE ARS POETICA

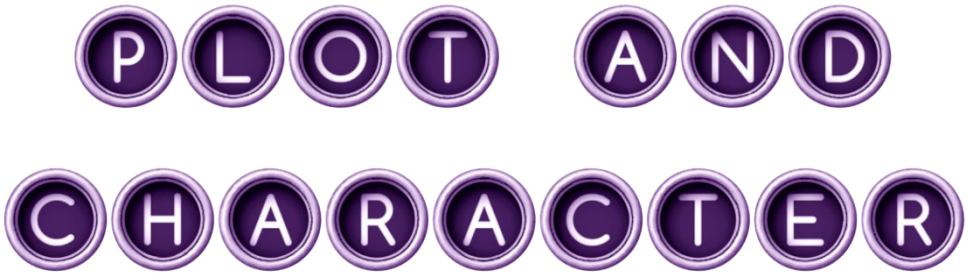
"Dramatic structure is not an arbitrary-or even a conscious-invention. It is an organic codification of the human mechanism for ordering information. Event, elaboration, denouement; thesis, antithesis, synthesis; boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl; act one, two, three."
David Mamet, playwright

"Structure usually inspires one of two emotions: fear or loathing. The fearful know there are rules, but they don't know what those rules are, and they definitely don't want to talk about it. The loathers think that structure is for nerds. It's boring and uncreative.

They see playwrights as artists, not technicians. They also don't want to talk about it."

Stephen Jeffreys, PLAYWRITING: STRUCTURE, CHARACTER, HOW AND WHAT TO WRITE





Practical Story Structures

"A story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order."
Jean-Luc Godard, film maker

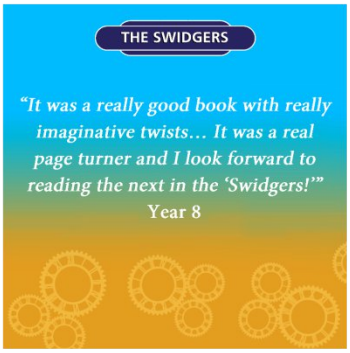
The Tripartite Structure

You'll find the Rule of Three or Tripartite Structure in rhetoric – *Veni, vidi, vici* ('I came, I saw, I conquered.') You'll find the Rule of Three in comedy – "There was an Englishman, an Irishman and a Welshman…" You'll find the Rule of Three in everyday language – 'wine, women and song' (technically this is called a *hendiatris*). And, of course, you find the Rule of Three very much there in Story Theory – boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl. Here, if you will, are just a few examples of the Tripartite Structure that have been offered by various story gurus:

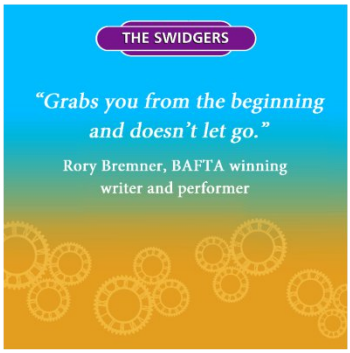
Suffering. Struggle. Overcoming.
Departure. Fulfilment. Return.
Setup. Confrontation. Resolution.
State. Elaborate. Resolve.
Born. Live. Die.

Thesis. Anti-thesis. Synthesis.
Problem. Journey. Solution.
Interruption. Separation. Reconnection.

Strictly speaking these are not Beginnings, Middles and Ends as defined in terms of Inciting Incident, Rising Action or Climax or as set out by Aristotle, where a basic definition of Beginning, Middle and End would be that a Beginning is that which requires nothing to precede it, and End is that which requires nothing to follow it and the Middle is that which requires something both before and after it. However, the Tripartite Structure offers different ways of seeing Beginnings, Middles and Ends – not just in terms of action begun and completed but also as a structure in terms of shape or 'Acts'.







Some more thoughts on the tripartite structure…

"The beginning, middle, and end are parodied, reversed, and hidden by modernism, but not abandoned."
Mason Cooley, American literary academic

"The beginning isn't simply the first in a series of events, but the originating event of all that follows. The middle isn't just the next event, but the story's central struggle. And the ending isn't just the last event, but the culminating event."
Steven James, author and writer

"That is what I define as a novel: something that has a beginning, a middle and an end, with characters and a plot that sustain interest from the first sentence to the last. But that is not what I do at all."
Guillermo Cabrera Infante

"You're searching, Joe,
For things that don't exist; I mean beginnings.
Ends and beginnings – there are no such things.
There are only middles."
Robert Frost, from the poem *In the Home Stretch*



'A dream is a wish your heart makes
When you're fast asleep
In dreams you will lose your heartaches
Whatever you wish for, you keep
Have faith in your dreams and someday
Your rainbow will come smiling through
No matter how your heart is grieving

If you keep on believing
The dream that you wish will come true.'
'A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes', songwriters, Mack David, Jerry Livingston and Al Hoffman from CINDERELLA

George Abbott's *Cinderella* Structure

George Francis Abbott (June 25, 1887 – January 31, 1995) was an American theatre producer, director, playwright, screenwriter and film director whose career spanned eight decades. On Broadway he directed THE BOYS FROM SYRACUSE (1938), PAL JOEY (1940): ON THE TOWN (1944), 1950: CALL ME MADAM (1950), A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN (1951), WONDERFUL TOWN (1953), THE PYJAMA GAME (1954), 1955: DAMN YANKEES (1955) and A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM (1962). According to Jonathan Lynn in his book COMEDY RULES, George Abbott's theory was that all plays are *Cinderella*. "What is *Cinderella*? She wants something. She can't get it. She gets it. She loses. She gets it. You remember WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY, with the man, the quadriplegic, lying in bed, wanting to die? He wants them to switch [life support machine] off. They won't do it. They agree to it. He loses in court. He appeals, wins and dies. *Cinderella*!"

We do often talk about a '*Cinderella* story', usually meaning some sort of rags-to-riches tale. And it's probably the world's favourite story and can be found across many genres, particularly the

musical. Think MY FAIR LADY, ANNIE, OLIVIER!, ME AND MY GIRL, HALF A SIXPENCE, SALLY, 42nd STREET AND THE SOUND OF MUSIC. But you will also find the *Cinderella* structure in many sport stories such as in CINDERELLA MAN (2005), the American biographical sports drama, titled after the nickname of world heavyweight boxing champion, James J. Braddock. And you might here include HUSTLE (2022), though in that movie there are joint protagonists in the young basket player and the sports coach. MRS. HARRIS GOES TO PARIS, a modern *Cinderella* tale but with the twist of a false prince, has its focus on the transformational power of the ball gown itself. Towards the end of the tale the dress is accidently destroyed but then comes the twist and it is replaced by something even better. Apparent defeat, as in every *Cinderella* story, eventually turns to triumph.

However, the point Abbott makes isn't so much about *Cinderella* as such or even rags-to-riches tales but rather the structural progression from want, to can't have, to getting and then not getting and, finally, getting. Those stages, and the many variations therein, together make up the essential structure of many a story. And, you might add, it's a structure that often reflects life itself.

ARCHIE: You seem different.
Mrs. Harris: 'Haute couture', you know.

ARCHIE: Is it not?
MRS. HARRIS: Hmm.
ARCHIE: But it's not the frock. It's lovely and all, but it's you. You're just beautiful.'
From MRS. HARRIS GOES TO PARIS, directed by Anthony Fabian, with screenplay by Carroll Cartwright and Anthony Fabian, based on the novel by Paul Gallico



"Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience."
Robert McKee

Robert McKee's Concept of Structure

Robert McKee is the most read and arguably the most influential of all the modern story gurus. "Have you been McKee-ed?" was a question the playwright Ken Campbell would often ask his fellow theatre practitioners. There was a time when everyone who worked in BBC drama was sent on McKee's legendary three day Story Seminar, but it's in Hollywood and the movie world in general where his influence has been most strongly felt.

In his seminars and in his book STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING Robert McKee suggest that there are three basic narrative structures and he calls these the classical, the anti-classical and the minimalist, where

minimalist is a simplified variation of the classical and anti-classical is an inversion of it.

McKee says that the classical structure is always rational, has causality where one thing logically leads to another, and finally there is closure that is absolute and irreversible. Usually there is a single protagonist and an opposing antagonist which results in conflict. Despite these forces the protagonist actively seeks their goal and in achieving that goal will go through some sort of inner change which results in their life values being altered. The character of the protagonist is likely to be flawed but not so much that the audience or reader is unable to connect with them. The tale that is told will be consistent and always meet genre expectations. When considering these criteria it's easy to see that McKee's idea of structure is not that dissimilar to the theories put forward in Aristotle's famous POETICS and McKee acknowledges this throughout his Story Seminar.



In general terms what McKee is talking about is what is sometimes called 'The Grand Narrative'. Philosophically the Grand

Narrative presents a tale where we can believe we are better than we are. It's a positive way of seeing the world and how it works, or perhaps more accurately how we would like the world to be. At the moment of crisis in such stories we go deep inside ourselves and somehow we find the capacity to be the person we've always strived and wanted to be. And if we have to make sacrifices to achieve that, don't worry, it'll be worth it.



So that's the classical structure. In his Story Seminar McKee then looks at alternatives to this Grand Narrative way of thinking. First, there's what he calls the anti-classical structure. The anti-classical structure, which in its way still has its own form of structuring, is not based on rationality or reason but rather anarchic senselessness. There may be many protagonists rather than the traditional hero. And when there is just the one, he is more often than not an unlikeable and unsympathetic anti-hero. As for narrative drive, well, this may not always be clear and along the way there could be many digressions and temporal distortions. There is, in other words, no dramatic unity of time and place. The ending may

not be obvious either and we may even be presented with several versions of what might happen. Plus there is likely to be non-diegetic intrusive (stuff from outside the story world) and inter-textuality (characters from other stories that keep popping up). And if it's a movie we're talking about, the editing is likely to be abrupt and include non--continuity jump-cuts

Whereas the classical structure reinforces the idea of the ultimate triumph of the individual, the anti-classical structure unsettles us by saying life rarely works out as we want it to and, if truth be known, few of us have any inner capabilities we can draw on in a crisis. The world, you see, doesn't make sense, nor does it have a purpose. There are no neat closures and life is forever inconsistent. And if you want to understand the difference between classical and anti-classical structure simply watch THE WIZARD OF OZ followed by David Lynch's WILD AT HEART.



McKee then looks at what he calls the minimalist structure. This, he says, is basically the classical structure but in a minimal form. Conflict tends to be more internal than external and the protagonist

is less active in the sense of pursuing a clear goal. The change is likely to be small yet significant. The ending itself could well be left open or ambiguous. Some example of minimalist structure in the movies would be HUD (1963), THE LAST PICTURE SHOW (1971), L'AVVENTURA (1960) and ORDINARY PEOPLE (1980).

Robert McKee's critics say that he is too regimented in his thinking. This is perhaps unfair because face-to-face he'll tell you that all his categories have shades of grey. Yet the classical structure is still, as it were, the blueprint from which we derive the others and this way of thinking does perhaps lessen the anarchic/queer/challenging/intrusive Story as a way of seeing the world in its own right. If anything, creating meaning though dramatic unity – which isn't how life works in reality – should be the deviation, and not the other way round.

"Story isn't a flight from reality but a vehicle that carries us on our search for reality."
Robert McKee



"The overwhelming majority of stories are based on a need, a problem, or an unusual situation, or all three of these elements combined. An easily understood example would be the average

'private eye' melodrama. The problem is usually the commission of a crime – homicide, robbery, or a mysterious disappearance. The need is to solve the problem – to clear the innocent, to catch the killer, the thief, or the blackmailer, to recover the missing person or the loot. The situations are developed to set up conflict, to deepen the mystery and/or suspense, and to give the protagonist 'man-size' obstacles to conquer."
Edward Dmytryk, ON SCREEN WRITING

Problem, Need, Situation and Solution

Edward Dmytryk's outline of the classic private eye story sets out the essential structure of most stories. Something happens that's a problem and so someone needs to put that right by doing something about it. It won't be easy and difficult situations will arise that create conflict and even danger, but when the problem is finally solved, well, that's when the story's action essentially comes to an end.

"Conflict. This word, this concept, appears again and again in every dramatic form – man against man, man against nature, good against evil, or even bad against worse."
Edward Dmytryk, ON SCREEN WRITING



Spine, noun. The line of bones down the centre of the back that provides support for the body and protects the spinal cord.
THE CAMBRIDGE DICTIONARY

The 'Spine' of a Story's Structure

'Spine' is arguably the simplest and most useful metaphor when considering the idea of story structure. Our bodily spine is what after all holds us upright and without it we would collapse – and so without a 'spine' would a plot.

Although thinking about 'story spine' is an abstract concept, it's useful to keep in mind the physiological reality of those skeleton bones, discs and central cord that keeps us alive and moving, for as in our bodies, every aspect of the whole connects to 'spine' – and so too does every aspect of the story. And as a metaphor the story spine it isn't that different from David Lodge's observation in THE ART OF FICTION that "the structure of a narrative is like the framework of girders that holds up a modern high-rise building: you can't see it, but it determines the edifice's shape and character."

If you follow Edward Dmytryk's outline of a basic tale then the spine is the line from the problem through to the solution by means of an action that comes from the need. If, on the other hand, you are thinking of the underlying myth of a story (sometimes called mythical infra-narrative) then that original myth/story would be the spine. For example, running through E.T. THE EXTRA TERRESTRIAL is the Judo-Christian *mythos* of Christ coming to Earth. You can also have a

theme based story spine, for example*, in order to love you must first learn to love yourself* which is the key to many redemption stories such as BEAUTY AND THE BEAST and GROUNDHOG DAY. Spine can also be used to describe an episodic tale or one structured on a series of self-revelations.

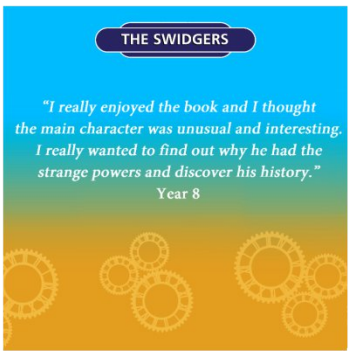


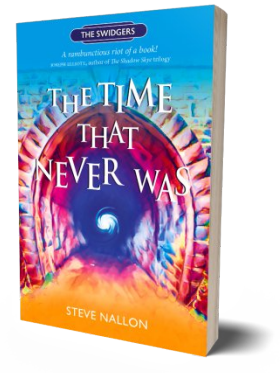
In Aristotelian terms spine is the completeness of the unity of action. Key aspects here are that the action is connected and causal, that the action is self-containment and involves closure, that it is probable and necessary, that the events happen to a single person and that nothing can be removed without changing the whole. The plot action must not be drawn out beyond its potential and only causal actions appropriate to the story being told should be included.

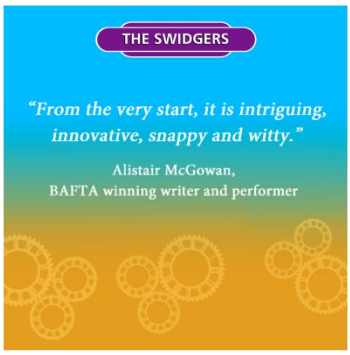
A character based way of looking at spine would be, borrowing a phrase from Stanislavski, to find the super-objective. Characters in dramas have both conscious and unconscious wants and the 'through line' to the 'super objective' is what connects those wants to the ultimate goal.

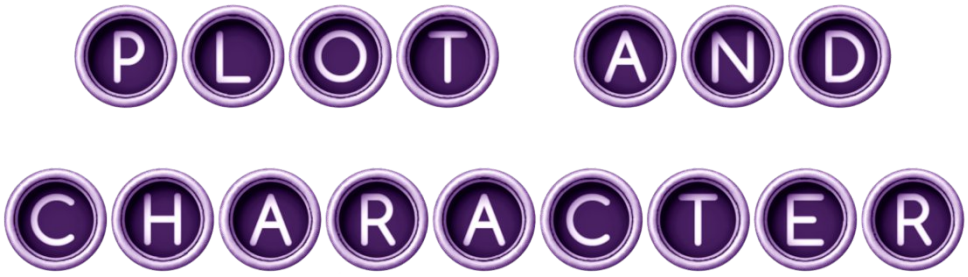
"The inner essence, the all-embracing goal, the objective of all objectives, the concentration of the entire score of the role, of all its major and minor units. The super-objective contains the meaning, the inner sense, of all the subordinate objectives of the play. In carrying out this one super-objective you have arrived at something even more important, super-conscious, ineffable, which is the spirit of [the writer] himself, the thing that inspired him to write and which inspires an actor to act."

Konstantine Stanislavski









What Does a Plot Need to be a Plot?

"In the first act get your principal character up a tree; in the second act, throw stones at him; in the third, get him down gracefully."
Anonymous, writing in the *Bridgeport Herald* in 1897 but has subsequently been attributed to numerous writers, including George Abbot, George F. Kaufman and Vladimir Nobokov

So, How Do You Define 'The Plot'?

Plot is one of those terms like form and genre that people often use and define very differently. The story theorist Robert McKee sums up plot simply as "the writer's choice of events and their design in time." Another story thinker, John Truby, says something similar, but expands the idea of plot by saying it is "the under-the-surface weaving of various lines of action or sets of events so that the story builds steadily from the beginning through the middle to the end." German writer and novelist, Gustav Freytag (1816 – 1895), divided plot in five different parts consisting of 1) exposition then conflict, 2) rising action, 3) climax, 4) falling action, and, ultimately, 5) denouement. This theory, because of its shape, became known as

'Gustav's Pyramid' or, as it is often called nowadays. 'The Story Mountain''. However, it was one of the first modern story gurus, Syd Field, who introduced into the idea of the plot 'paradigm'.

Field talked of the three act structure, essentially dividing those acts into what he called 'Set-up, Confrontation and Resolution', which isn't that different from that idea of getting your character up that tree, throwing stones at him and then getting him gracefully down again. Field also talked of a plot in terms of 'plot points', and he defined a plot point as being "any incident, episode, or event that hooks into the action and spins it around in another direction." And for Field the two main plots points were Inciting Incident and the climax, whereas lesser ones he called 'pinch points'. Some story gurus still use the term 'pinch points' but most now follow Robert McKee and talk in terms of 'turning points'.



There are then many ways of thinking and talking about what a plot is. However, perhaps instead of trying to find an all encompassing definition of 'Plot', or even what it looks like, perhaps

it might be better to ask *'What does a plot require in order to be a plot?'*

Some more thoughts of what a plot is…

"Considerations of plot do a great deal of heavy lifting when it comes to long-form narrative – readers will overlook the most ham-fisted prose if only a writer can make them long to know what happens next."
Lynn Coady, Canadain novelist and journalist

"Like a lot of writers, I just got sick to death of conventional fiction. I absolutely couldn't stand the illusion of reality and plot. I just couldn't stomach it."
Jane Alison, Australian author

"The Rising Movement - The action has been started; the chief persons have shown what they are; the interest has been awakened. Mood, passion, involution have received an impulse in a given direction."
Gustav Freytag, DIE TECHNIK DES DRAMAS

"All drama is conflict. Without conflict, there is no action. Without action, there is no character. Without character, there is no story. And without story, there is no screenplay."
Syd Field, story guru



"But really, if you ask me, there is only one kid of plot. One. Stuff happens. That's it."
Nora Raleigh Baskin

What Does a Plot Needs to be a Plot?

John le Carré once said that "*'The cat sat on the mat'* is not the beginning of a story, but *'The cat sat on the dog's mat'* is." What perhaps he was hinting at was that as soon as the dog whose mat it was comes along, there's bound to be some sort of conflict. And that would be the beginning of a story. And so conflict and a beginning become our first two requirements of plot.

But in the battle between the cat and the dog which is the protagonist and which is the antagonist? The cat, who initiates the potential conflict by sitting on the dog's mat, could in a way be said to be the antagonist in that the dog, who as to figure out a way of getting his mat back again that then leads to action, might be said to be the protagonist. In story terms then, the easiest way to establish the protagonist is ask 'Whose mission is it?' And in this case it's the dog's. Having said that, isn't it possible to argue a case for the cat being the protagonist, in that the cat had its own proactive action when taking over the dog's mat? So perhaps then who is protagonist and who is antagonist depends on where you start your story? Yet at the time the cat took over the mat it faced no opposition. No conflict – and plot needs conflict. So let's stick to the idea of 'the mission' is what defines the protagonist and add to that the necessity of

someone – feline or otherwise – trying to prevent or stop that mission from being accomplished, namely the antagonist. There is of course also the issue of which is hero and which is villain. Well, in some ways that very much depends on your opinion of dogs and cats.

All this may seem a little pedantic and even silly but it's important to make the point that protagonist and antagonist are not necessarily equivalent to hero and villain. Protagonist and antagonist are essentially morally neutral terms. Anyway, in the battle of cat and dog, no matter whose side you're on, a protagonist and an antagonist are both certainly necessary for a plot. And so together protagonist and antagonist are our next two requirements.

In his series of lectures on the novel, E.M. Forster defined a story as "a narrative of events in their time-sequence." He then added, "'*The king died and then the queen died*' is a story. '*The king dies, and then the queen died of grief*' is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it." '*The king died and then the queen died*' is a simple statement of fact, one thing happened and then another thing happened. But when you say '*The king dies, and then the queen died of grief*' you are constructing a relationship between one and the other. You are in effect making one a direct consequence of the other. And so causality, or causally linked events, where one thing happens *because* of whatever came before it, becomes our next requirement of plot.



The grandfather of all story gurus was Aristotle. He offered no definition of 'plot' as such, but what he said of tragedy in POETICS was this: "A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and possessing magnitude." There are quite a few ideas to unpack there but let's concentrate on 'Action'. The word Aristotle used for what we call action was the Greek word *praxis*. Scholars dispute exactly what Aristotle meant by *praxis*, for there is no true equivalent in English. However, perhaps the idea of a 'purposeful striving toward a goal or a destination' gets close. Action then, as Aristotle uses the term in his full definition, refers to that which is deliberately enacted at a scale and seriousness that will in time result in the completion of that which is intended.

It's important to understand that when talking about 'Action' in this sense that action doesn't mean just doing things, as a child might when they run around and jump about. Nor is it what physically happens on the stage or screen, be it a car chase or a sword fight. No, *Praxis*/Action must have a motive and a goal. Or, to put it as simply as possible, action needs a purposeful intent that leads to a

conclusion. And so action, as defined as ‘purposeful intent’, is our next requirement of plot.

An obvious thing to say as well about plot is that it must have a beginning, middle and end. We’ve already mentioned ‘Beginning’ as one of our requirements of plot, but now let’s take a more detailed look as to what a ‘Beginning’ actually is.



The story guru Linda Seger came up with the idea of what she called a catalyst event. Seger said that the “catalyst begins a story’s action. Something happens – a crime occurs, a letter arrives, Aunt Mary appears on the doorstep – and from that moment on the story is defined. Until the catalyst kicks off the story, the only information the audience has is where and when the film takes place. But once an event happens, the story suddenly has focus and direction.” However, is ‘something happens’ enough to define a beginning? What if the crime occurs and everyone ignores it, or if that letter is simply put in drawer and forgotten about or if poor Aunt Mary is told to go home? Surely then each story comes to end before it has even had a chance to begin?

Perhaps though what Seger was driving at is that there has been a change in things. A ‘disequilibrium’ has been created, if you want to get technical with some story theory jargon. And if that change/disequilibrium then leads to an action that has purposeful intent – ‘we must solve the crime’, ‘we had better reply to that letter’, ‘we must invite Aunt Mary to stay’ – then what you have then is what Syd Field called the Inciting Incident. In other words, we have a ‘trigger for action’. And since the ‘Action’ has now begun, we now have what we can call ‘Beginning’. So let’s now more clearly define our beginning as an inciting incident resulting from a catalyst event that has brought about some sort of change in things.

But a ‘beginning’, at least in story terms, implies that which also follows a beginning, namely a ‘middle’ and ‘end’. So what of those? When we talk about ‘end’ in story terms what we mean is the climax of the plot rather than simply where the story stops. The word climax comes from the Greek word *klimax*, meaning ladder. And the reaching of the top of a ladder is a useful thought to bear in mind when considering the concept of what an ending is, for an ending is the apex or pinnacle where there is simply nowhere further to go.

Aristotle, in one of his more simple phrases, said that an ‘End’ is something “after which nothing else can occur”. Robert McKee said essentially the same thing when he defined the climax as that “which brings about an absolute and irreversible change.” And for McKee, whatever it is that changes, changes in such a way that it cannot be

unchanged. And McKee also pointed out that the climax must directly relate to the incited incident that brought about the action that now leads to the goal/destination/task being completed.



Let's go back to that cat on that mat. If the dog kills the cat that sat on its mat, then obviously that cat can never sit on that dog's mat again. And so climax, as defined as an irreversible change that allows nothing to follow it, becomes our next requirement for plot. And while we're at it, let's say that the 'middle' is everything that happens in between the initial Inciting Incident and the ultimate climax. In the battle for the mat, the cat wants to keep the mat, the dog wants to regain it. And since both dogs and cats can be very territorial, it's fair to say neither will give the mat up easily. Plus cats and dogs are clever, and inevitably they'll find ways to prevent the other from getting what they want. These you might call 'obstacles to action' and in stories the action of overcoming those obstacles/barriers/impediments is what often makes up the 'Middle'.

But that poor cat – does it have to die? Probably not. If the mat is big enough perhaps the dog and cat could learn to share it. Or

maybe it's a continuing battle like TOM AND JERRY and one day the cat wins the battle for the mat and on another day the dog does. The end on these occasions would be when the dog or cat made a permanent retreat. How that is achieved and established is up to the inventive mind of the storyteller.

Anyway, we now have our essential plot requirements and they are: protagonist/antagonist, conflict, causality, action (or purposeful intent), catalyst event, inciting incident (or 'beginning'), obstacles to action and climax (or 'end').

"The word 'plot', as commonly accepted, conveys but an indefinite meaning. Most persons think of it as of simple complexity… but the greatest involution of incident will not result in plot; which, properly defined, is that in which no part can be displaced without ruin to the whole. It may be described as a building so dependently constructed, that to change the position of a single brick is to overthrow the entire fabric."
Edgar Allan Poe in *Graham's Magazine*, April, 1841 (with some of the same ideas appearing in A CHAPTER OF SUGGESTIONS, written in 1845)



CLARA: Now, what's the plan?
DOCTOR: Who said I've got a plan?
CLARA: Course you've got a plan. You took that.
DOCTOR: Maybe I'm an idiot.

CLARA: You're not. You're clever. Really clever.
DOCTOR: Are you?
(He throws Clara the umbrella.)
DOCTOR: If I've got a plan, what is it? You tell me.
DOCTOR WHO, *The Snowmen,* written by Steven Moffat

The Plan of Action

But aren't we skipping over something here? What about the 'plot' in the sense of the dog's plan of action? Yes, that too is a 'plot' but when we talk or use the word 'plot' in that sense what we are talking about specifically is a stratagem, project, scheme, ploy or ruse. Think 'Gunpowder Plot' - *Remember, remember, the fifth of November, Gunpowder, treason and plot!* Yet doesn't our 'purposeful intent towards a goal' in a way cover that idea? Yes, but what plan of action adds is method, for intentions are no good without means. And so method becomes our final essential requirement of plot.

"Your mission, should you choose to accept it…"
The self-destructing taped message heard each week in the 1960s television the series MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE



"The writer is generous, too, in that, for all his mastery of technique, he introduces only those techniques useful to the story: he is the story's servant, not a donzel for whom the story serves as an excuse to show off pyrotechnics."

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

What Else is there a Writer can do the Enhance a Plot?

Of course there are many things that you could add that would improve a plot and make it more interesting. An exciting hook at the start to capture the attention of the reader or viewer. Give the Hero some sort of psychological development. Maybe put in a surprising revelation that sends the story in an unexpected direction – 'the plot thickens', as they say. Maybe too you could throw in a deadline or a literal ticking clock. And a dilemma, so that there's no easy choice for your heroine. Perhaps she should have a low point or crisis of confidence. And throw in as well some sort of final showdown between protagonist and antagonist.



A more general point is that things should become progressively more intense as the plot moves along. This can be

done, for example, by raising the stakes, burning bridges, creating points of no return or simply putting your private people in public spaces where their reputations can be won or lost.

The writer many find that the theme of their story is natural justice or forbidden love or self-sacrifice – and once this is understood that theme can be made clearer to enhance the emotional intensity. The theme then becomes, if you like, a life lesson you can take with you at the end.

Yes, all of these would certainly help a plot become a really good plot. But be careful not to make your plotting devices too obvious. For art is the concealment of art. As Billy Wilder said, "The more subtle and elegant you are in hiding your plot points, the better you are as a writer."

"Entropy is a logical process towards the simplest, the most ordered state. So is drama. I know the dictionary defines entropy as a progression towards the most disordered state – but on this point, I take issue with that most excellent book."
David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM

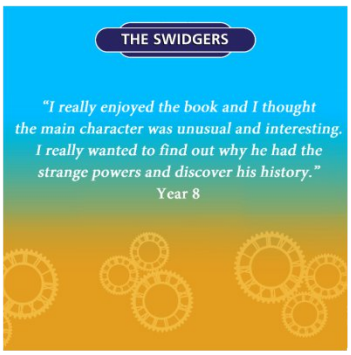


"My books tend to be based on situation rather than story… I want to put a group of characters (perhaps a pair; perhaps even just one) in some sort of predicament and then watch them try to work themselves free. My job isn't to help them work their way free, or manipulate them to safety – those are the jobs that require the noisy jackhammer of plot – but to watch what happens and then write it down."

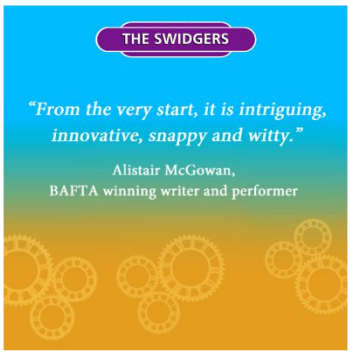
Stephen King, ON WRITING

What's the Difference between Plot and Situation?

Stephen King when talking about CARRIE in his book ON WRITING said that "none of the story's details and incidents proceed[ed] from plot; they were organic; each arising naturally from the initial situation…. A strong enough situation renders the whole question of plot moot, which is fine by me. Character and predicament." Well, you can see what King means, for Carrie's a situation, and is happening to her, creates dangerous predicament for herself and those around her.







Elsewhere Stephen King says, “My books tend to be based on situation rather than story. Some of the ideas which have produced those books are more complex than others, but the majority start out with the stark simplicity of a department store window display or a waxwork tableau. I want to put a group of characters (perhaps a pair; perhaps even just one) in some sort of predicament and then watch them try to work then selves free. My job isn’t to *help* them work their way free, or manipulate them to safety – those are jobs which require the noisy jackhammer of plot – but to watch what happens and then write it down. The situation comes first. The characters - always flat and unfeatured, to begin with – come next.”

Sounds fair enough, but isn’t King being a little disingenuous saying ‘watch them free themselves’ in that his characters are fictions of his own mind and ultimately it is that mind that will find ways – call it plot or not – which will free them. Andy Dufresne, for example, in RITA HAYWORTH AND SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION didn’t come alive on the page and tell Stephen King how he was going to escape (though that might one day make an interesting Stephen King story in itself). Andy’s plan involving the Rita Hayworth movie poster, a hammer hidden in a Bible and the rest all came from King’s own imagination and does involve a plot, at least in the sense of plan of action as in the means of escape. Plus there is a clear crisis (he’s incarcerated for weeks) and an unexpected climax (he makes his escapes).

Perhaps though what Stephen King means when he talks about ‘the noisy jackhammer of plot’ is that it’s better to let the ideas come to you rather than impose them on a story. In other words, you should let a story grow organically from the predicament of the situation. Plot in the sense of the Edgar Wallace Plot Wheel is pure mechanism that dictates both character and situation – and that is not the Stephen King way. Nor, arguably, that of any other writer worth their salt.



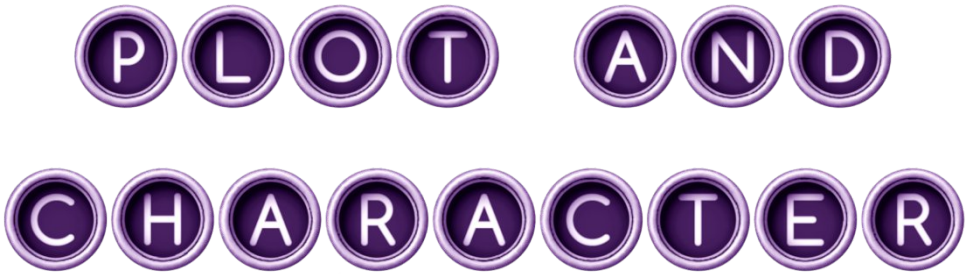
So should we then make a distinction between a ‘plot drama’ and ‘situation drama’? Probably not because there are already too many categories in Story theory. Besides, it’s all a matter of balance and, ultimately, does the drama work? Shakespeare’s LOVE’S LABOUR’S LOST has hardly any ‘plot’ but it does have a dramatic and indeed comic situation. A group of young men vow to forsake women and give their lives to study, only then a group of beautiful young women turn up – and so that vow soon goes out the window. Incidentally, the reason for the arrival of the ladies– on an embassy concerning a hundred thousand crowns – also goes out the window,

and is never mentioned again. Shakespeare just wanted to get young men and young women together and then see what happens. And what does happen comes as no surprise.

A more recent ‘situation drama’ is the movie LIVING (2022), directed by Oliver Hermanus from a screenplay by Kazuo Ishiguro, adapted from the 1952 Japanese film Ikiru directed by Akira Kurosawa, which in turn was inspired by the 1886 Russian novella THE DEATH OF IVAN ILYICH by Leo Tolstoy. In the movie set in 1953, an Englishman is told he is dying and makes the decision, in the time he has left, to enjoy life more. Yes there’s a ‘plot’ about the planning and building of a playground but that’s not what the film is about. It’s really a character drama about a man with little time who, albeit it small ways, helps bring about changes to those around him.

“The most interesting situations can usually be expressed as a ‘What-if’ question: What if vampires invaded a small New England village? (SALEM’S LOT). What if a policeman in a remote Nevada town went berserk and started killing everyone in sight? (DESPERATION) What if a cleaning woman suspected of a murder she got away with (her husband) fell under suspicion for a murder she did not commit (her employer)? (DOLORES CLAIBORNE).”
Stephen King, ON WRITING





The Essentials of Plot – Catalyst Event

"Plot is tremendously important to me: I can't stand books where nothing happens, and I can't imagine ever writing a novel without at least one murder."
Ned Beauman, British novelist, journalist and screenwriter

Requirements of Plot

The rudimentary requirements of plot are: Protagonist/Antagonist, Conflict, Causality, Action, Catalyst Event, Inciting Incident, Method, Obstacles to Action and Climax. And so now let's look at each of those in more detail. Beginning with catalyst event or 'The Day of Change', as some people call it.

"Details are where a theory can be held together or fall apart. The same is true about a plot."
Sarah Richard



"Catalyst*, noun. 1. Something that makes a chemical reaction happen more quickly without itself being changed. 2. An event or person that causes great change"*
Cambridge Dictionary

The Catalyst Event

A catalyst event in story terms is a disruption or disturbance to the status quo. And it's a change of circumstances that creates a disequilibrium. In common parlance, 'Something's upset the applecart', 'that's put the cat among the pigeons', or, as Granny would say in SWIDGERS, 'That's put the goat in the daisy garden'. And often a key feature of that which brings change is that it can come from nowhere. But what can be here today that wasn't there yesterday? Or happen now that didn't happen before? And where does that 'something' originate?

Well, one obvious answer is Mother Nature. A snow storm. An asteroid. A shark. A virus. And it's easy to find engaging and challenging stories that have each of there. Another catalyst event is an accident or coincidence. A mistaken identity. A chance meeting with an old friend. A dog walker finding a dead body early one morning. Picking up a hitchhiker. A puncture. The casual overhearing of a remark. A letter sent to the wrong address. Human remains found in a suitcase after a sale at an auction. All have great story potential.

But catalyst events needn't just come from outside ourselves. Human beings are quite capable of thinking up things that seem to come from nowhere too, for we are instinctive and inventive creatures – "Hey guys! I've this great idea. And I'm going to call it a 'wheel'." Maybe the invention of the wheel is a bit obvious, but what about a time machine, or a social network called Facebook, or a bouncing bomb, or taking a dead body and finding a way to make it live. Some great stories there. And we human beings, like the proverbial cat, are curious creatures who sometimes stray too far – "Hey look guys! I've found an entrance to a cave. Why don't we explore what's inside…"

Another point here is that human bodies change and develop. There's puberty and adolescence when we're young, and illness and loss of faculties when we're old. These too seem to come from nowhere and they certainly bring change. Plus, of course, there's the mysteries of the human heart. Sudden jealousy. A careless remark. Uncontrollable lust. Each can be a catalyst event in its own right for each creates a disequilibrium in the state of affairs that needs to be put right.

Some more thoughts on catalyst events…

"WAY UPSTREAM… All I had so far was a situation waiting to happen. What was needed now was to create the vacuum into which something quite unpleasant, quite menacing could appear. A

catalyst, something, that would threaten and finally upend this increasingly fractious status quo… Enter Vince… from there on, character more or less drove the plot."
Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

"When I speak to children about writing, I tell them, 'You don't have a story until something goes wrong.'"
Steven James, author of NEVER THE SAME

"George Feydeau, the greatest writer of farce in the history of French theatre, said that an audience will accept any premise as a starting point of a play. If you want the play to depend on a particular fact, or problem – for instance, that there is a cow on the roof – just assert that there is a cow on the roof. Don't attempt to explain how it got there."
Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES



"Mankind survived the last ice age. We're certainly capable of surviving this one. All depends on whether or not we're able to learn from our mistakes."
Jack Hall in THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW

Catalyst Event – Nature and the Weather

In KEY LARGO there's a storm that keeps everybody confined in a hotel and in the movie V.I.P.S it's heavy fog that forces a diverse group of Very Important People to come together at the VIP lounge

at Heathrow which results is fascinating and interconnecting plots. Then of course there are those environmental movie disasters that alter the state of things such as THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW and EARTHQUAKE, or those with a raging storm such as DEEP BLUE SEA and THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE. But nature doesn't have to be big to make an impact. In David Constantine's IN ANOTHER COUNTRY (later made into the movie 45 YEARS) melting ice reveals the dead body of a man's first love who died in a skiing accident and this uncovering ultimately leads to a devastating emotional realisation by the wife he subsequently married. And digging up the ice in John Carpenter's THE THING leads to all sorts of unexpected questions, including, of course, who's human and who isn't.

Some thoughts on the weather and how the weather brings about change…

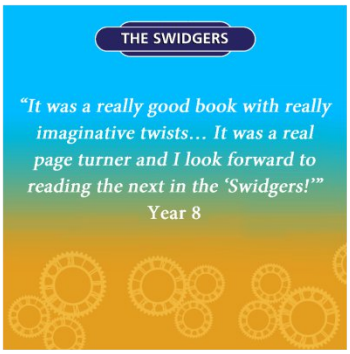
"In fair weather prepare for foul."
Thomas Fuller, English churchman and historian

"A change in the weather is sufficient to recreate the world and ourselves."
Marcel Proust, novelist

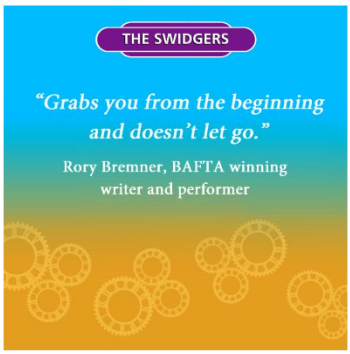
"I'm leaving because the weather is too good. I hate London when it's not raining."
Groucho Marx, comedian and actor

"Among famous traitors of history one might mention the weather."
Ilka Chase, American actress, radio host, and novelist

"Most floods are caused by man, not weather; deforestation, levee construction, erosion, and overgrazing all result in the loss of ecosystem services."
Paul Hawken, American environmentalist, entrepreneur, author, economist, and activist







"The Bermuda Triangle got tired of warm weather. It moved to Alaska. Now Santa Claus is missing."
Steven Wright, comedian

"I cannot command winds and weather."
Horatio Nelson, British Admiral

"Conversation about the weather is the last refuge of the unimaginative."
Oscar Wilde, Irish writer and playwright



"A coincidence which is part of the generating circumstances of a story is allowable, but one which solves the plot in a story intended to emphasise character is not allowable."
Thomas H. Uzzell, NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

Catalyst Event – Coincidence, Accidents and Chance

"Coincidence", said Arthur Koestler, "may be described as the chance encounter of two unrelated causal chains which miraculously, it seems, merge into a significant event." Coincidence in this sense is the catalyst event in several of Hitchcock's *Wrong Man* movies. In NORTH BY NORTHWEST two guys are having a 'Mr Kaplan' paged in a hotel reception area. The two men believe Mr Kaplan, who as it turns out doesn't even exist, is some sort of government agent. But just as the bad guys are having Mr Kaplan paged, Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) happens to put his hand up. Wrong moment, wrong man. But from then on the two men believe that Roger Thornhill is Mr Kaplan, the government secret agent they are after. In fact, 'Mr Kaplan' is just an invented decoy, but the bad guys don't know that – which is bad news for Cary Grant but great news for movie goers.

Another simple moment of coincidence can be found at the start of BEN-HUR. An important procession is going by when a loose tile falls from the roof of Ben-Hur's house and startles one of the horses. It's pure chance that this accident happened at the precise moment, but, nevertheless, some sort of conspiracy is assumed and

Ben-Hur is arrested. And it's this coincidental Catalyst Event which takes Ben-Hur into a completely new life. That one falling tiles results in an incredibly long novel and an similarly long movie.



Chance is similar to coincidence, except for the simultaneity. In BRIEF ENCOUNTER Laura and Alec brought together when Laura, standing on the train platform, gets a bit of grit in her eye. A straight forward enough accident, but by chance, Alec, waiting for his train in the tearoom, is a doctor and so takes over the situation and removes the grit. That first physical contact then grows as the story develops into an intimate and emotional one. It's the renewal of car insurance that brings together handsome insurance salesman Walter Neff and frustrated housewife Phyllis Dietrichson. But had Walter not being quite so good looking and open to suggestion, Phyllis's plans to kill her husband would have been a non-starter.

It's chance from a while back that leads to the change of fortune for one Charles Foster Kane in CITIZEN KANE. It turns out his mother once took a deed to a mine in exchange for a small amount of money owing. But that deed is now worth a fortune, for gold has

been discovered in the mine and so a trust is established to provide for Kane's education. And by the time Kane gains control of his trust, prudent investing has made Kane one of the richest men in the world.

Robert McKee says that when coincidence is involved in a plot the best way to deal with it is to draw attention to the coincidence because if the characters don't the audience certainly will. McKee makes the point that in CASABLANCA it's essentially a coincidence that begins about the romantic action. And what the character says of that moment of coincidence is, of course, one of the most famous lines in Hollywood's history – "Of all the gin joints in all the world, she had to walk into my mine."



Coincidence, or at least a series of coincidences, is much frowned upon nowadays by story gurus. You can get away perhaps with one or two but don't push your luck. That said, GET SHORTY, in part a satire on the movies and the movie business, has quite a few not always entirely credible coincidence. Victorian novelists, of course, loved them. To be fair, people who resided in towns and

even cities during the late nineteenth century lived in a smaller world than we do now and so, not surprisingly perhaps, coincidence abounded. Besides, Victorian readers enjoyed that aspect of fate that brings people together.

It should be pointed out that there is one genre that welcomes and indeed demands coincidence. And that is farce. Excessive coincidence is the comic exaggeration of that particular comedy genre. Audiences here are more likely to accept coincidence and in fact welcome it for the fun and chaos that numerous coincidences generate. Think BRINGING UP BABY, WHAT'S UP DOC? and A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM. But even with coincidence it's best to keep the right side of just about believable.

Some more thoughts on coincidences…

SAM LOWRY: I only know you got the wrong man.
JACK LINT: Information Transit got the wrong man. I got the 'right' man. The wrong one was delivered to me as the right man, I accepted him on good faith as the right man. Was I wrong?
From BRAZIL, directed by Terry Gilliam with a screenplay by Terry Gilliam, Tom Stoppard and Charles McKeown

"It's hard to believe in coincidence, but it's even harder to believe in anything else."
John Green, WILL GRAYSON, WILL GRAYSON

"With a farce obviously a good deal is to do with structure – making the improbable at least temporarily believable. Planting important

information as casually and effortlessly as possible in order to close off what might be termed the corridor of coincidence."
Alan Ayckbourn, THE CRAFT ART OF PLAYMAKING

"Do you think the universe fights for souls to be together? Some things are too strange and strong to be coincidences."
Emery Allen

"We do not create our destiny; we participate in its unfolding. Synchronicity works as a catalyst toward the working out of that destiny."
David Richo, THE POWER OF COINCIDENCE

"A certain man once lost a diamond cuff-link in the wide blue sea, and twenty years later, on the exact day, a Friday apparently, he was eating a large fish - but there was no diamond inside. That's what I like about coincidence."
Vladimir Nabokov, LAUGHTER IN THE DARK

"Coincidence is God's way of being anonymous."
Laura Pedersen

"Trifles light as air, are to the jealous confirmations strong, as proofs of holy writ."
Iago in William Shakespeare's OTHELLO

"We often dream about people from whom we receive a letter by the next post. I have ascertained on several occasions that at the moment when the dream occurred the letter was already lying in the post-office of the addressee."
C.G. Jung, SYNCHRONICITY: AN ACAUSAL CONNECTING PRINCIPLE

"When someone says, 'I don't believe in coincidence.' I say, 'Oh my God, me neither!'"
Alasdair Beckett-King

"Coincidences are spiritual puns."
G.K. Chesterton

"Coincidence or misunderstandings that would be judged outrageous in a drama become permissible in farce. Indeed, unrealistic exaggeration has the same illuminating effect as the comic distortions of caricature and is equally desirable."
Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

"I've often noticed that when coincidences start happening they go on happening in the most extraordinary way. I dare say it's some natural law that we haven't found out."
Agatha Christie, whodunit writer



'I'm a what?' gasped Harry.
'A wizard, o' course,' said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, 'an' a thumpin' good'un I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be?'
From HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE by J.K. Rowling

Catalyst Event – From Within Ourselves

People get ideas. People fall in love. People become suspicious. People look at mountain and want to climb them. Desire arises from

within, as does wants and need. And all in their own way can be catalyst events.

Then, as said, there's our human bodies. They never stay the same. And each stage of life can be a catalyst event. A classic 'body change' narrative is the 'Coming-of-Age Story', or the 'Sexual Awakening Narrative'. Your first love. Coming-out stories. Puberty and all that. Think of HEARTSTOPPERS, MOONRISE KINGDOM, LADY BIRD, JUNO, BOY ERASED, THE EDGE OF SEVENTEEN, CALL ME BY YOUR NAME. And this type of story has its clever variations, for example, the movie BIG, where by magic a child literally grows up too soon.



In fantasy fiction the change in a child's capabilities is often explored in supernatural context. A typical fantasy 'Coming-of-Age' or 'Rites-of-Passage' story would go like this. A young person, usually misunderstood by their family, discovers within themselves a special power, but this gift is desired by a dark force who is prepared to do anything in order to possess it. The hero then meets a mentor who offers guidance and learning, leading to a journey of sorts. There are

obstacles to be faced and trials to be overcome, and the mentor figure is sometimes there to help, but in the end the hero must confront that evil force on their own. Think Harry Potter, Dorothy Gale, Frodo Baggins and Luke Skywalker or indeed, our own hero of SWIDGERS, William Arthur. And the young hero finds themselves in the unavoidable battle, which can be either mental or physical, and in the process undergoes a rite-of-passage that takes them to towards maturity and possibly adulthood. It's an archetypal narrative that in its retelling must find new ways to enchant and surprise.

'You're not my grandma,' I told her again, 'and in fact, I don't think you've ever been anyone's grandma.'
I expected her to stop again. But no.
'It matters not who am, the only thing that matters is what I am. And I, William Arthur, am a Swidger. Just like you.'
'A Swidger?'
'Yes, that's what we are. Swidgers. Put on this earth to change lives for the better with a switch or a dodge, a shove or a nudge.'
Wow. To know what you are but never before have a name for it. Only now I did.
Swidger. I am a Swidger.
From THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, book one in the SWIDGERS Time Adventure series



'You could be happy here, I could take care of you. I wouldn't let anybody hurt you. We could grow up together, E.T.'
Elliott to E.T. in E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial

Catalyst Event – An Unexpected Arrival: E.T. and JAWS

The unexpected arrival is the catalyst event of both E.T. and JAWS. In the first, it's not until Elliott meets E.T. that we have an inciting incident, for it's this meeting which leads to Elliott's decision to keep his new friend and the beginning of an action with purposeful intent. Further, it's not until E.T. announces that he wants to go home that Elliott decides to help E.T. contact his parents. This then becomes the action plan. It is said that the inciting incident must connect to the climax, a climax being that which brings about an absolute and irreversible change. In E.T. that is the decision of E.T. to rejoin his parents on their spaceship. But before this happens there is an impossible dilemma for both Elliott and his Extra Terrestrial friend. E.T. would like Elliott to come with him, Elliott would like the alien to live on earth. The words are simple enough, "Come" and "Stay", but with all that has gone before they have tremendous emotional impact.



In JAWS, although the audience witnesses the arrival and attack of the shark, it's not until this is confirmed as a 'SHARK ATTACK' via a teleprinter which is then read by the police chief, Martin Brody, that there is what we may call a 'trigger for action'. And that action becomes to close the beach. But the mayor of Amity convinces Brody it could just have been a boating accident and so the beach remains open. But that unexpected arrival hasn't gone away and a boy is killed. A shark is subsequently caught, and all now seems back to normal. But it's the wrong shark, yet few people will listen to the warning. Later, on the 4th of July, when the beach is packed, many are injured when that shark attacks again. It's only then that a new action plan is drawn-up and that is to go out to sea and kill the shark for sure. And obviously once that shark is blown to smithereens, as indeed it is, we have what we can call an absolute and irreversible change where nothing can follow.



A point to make when looking at the actions of JAWS is that it is what is known as a 'diptych plot', the word diptych coming from art

history where a diptych painting is on two hinged wooden panels. In other words, JAWS is a dual action plot in two parts.

'You're gonna need a bigger boat.'
Chief of Police Brody in JAWS



'It's a twister! It's a twister!'
Zeke in THE WIZARD OF OX

Catalyst Event – A Storm Comes: THE WIZARD OF OZ

Of all Catalyst events, a change in the weather has been probably the most popular for story writers, for it immediately brings about a disequilibrium with terrible consequences. The most famous example of this is the tornado or 'twister' in THE WIZARD OF OZ where Dorothy Gale is hit on the head by flying debris. However, it is not until she wakes up in Oz and discovers there is no possible way back to Kansas without the aid of the Wizard of Oz, that Dorothy makes it her action to seek out the Wizard in the hope that he will take her home. As in many stories, Dorothy meets friends and helpers along the way but when they eventually meet the Wizard, he

turns out to be a fraud. As it turns out, Dorothy always had the power to go home, but she needed the journey to find it in herself.

'There's no place like home! There's no place like home!'
Dorothy in THE WIZARD OF OZ



'By the sword you did your work, and by the sword you die.'
Clytemnestra in Aeschylus's AGAMEMNON

Catalyst Event – A Homecoming: THE ORESTEIA

What of the homecoming? Well, a homecoming is one the oldest Catalyst events in drama, for in AGAMEMNON, the first play of THE ORESTEIA, it's when the warrior Agamemnon returns to Argos from the Trojan War that his wife Clytemnestra murders him in his bath. In turn this leads to the next drama in the trilogy, THE LIBATION BEARERS, where Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, avenges his father's death by killing his mother. This results in the situation of the third drama of THE ORESTEIA, THE FURIES (EUMENIDES), where the revengeful mother sends the Eumenides, deities of vengeance, to turn Orestes mad.

Each play has its own ending which in turn becomes the Catalyst event for the following drama. Agamemnon is murdered by Clytemnestra in the first play, which becomes the reason Clytemnestra is herself killed in the second. And the revenging furies of madness she sends in the third play are a direct consequence of her own killing by her son. The cycle is only brought to an end with the establishment of a court to settle disputes around justice and retribution. Indeed, the theme of public justice and private vengeance is a subject of several Greek plays. That said, the Furies remain – but at a distance.

'You two parties, summon your witnesses, set out your proofs, with sworn evidence to back your stories. Once I've picked the finest men in Athens, I'll return. They'll rule fairly in this case, bound by a sworn oath to act with justice.'

Athena in Aeschylus's THE FURIES or EUMENIDES





Doc Brown: 'Marty, I'm sorry, but the only power source capable of generating 1.21 gigawatts of electricity is a bolt of lightning.'
Marty McFly: 'What did you say?'
Doc Brown: 'A bolt of lightning. Unfortunately, you never know when or where it's ever gonna strike.'
Marty McFly: 'We do now.'
(MARTY HANDS THE DOC THE "SAVE THE CLOCK TOWER" FLYER)
From BACK TO THE FUTURE

Catalyst Events and the Plot of BACK TO THE FUTURE

An unexpected arrival. An accident. A homecoming. A storm. All these are potential catalyst events that can lead to inciting incidents which trigger action. And all three feature in different ways in the plot of that most famous of all time travel adventures, BACK TO THE FUTURE.

The unexpected arrival, the first of two, is the sudden appearance of the terrorists, which leads to the shooting of Doc Brown and the necessity of Marty escaping the situation using the DeLorean time machine. The accident is when Marty, now in 1955, is hit by a car when he saves his father who is falling from a tree. The homecoming is somewhat of an ironic one, for that's when Marty, as a result of that car accident, is taken into his mother's family home.

Well, his mother when younger, for Lorraine, his mother in 1985, is a young woman around about Marty's age in 1955 – and she soon falls in love with her 'son'.

Now let's see how each of these events lead to a trigger for action. The central action of BACK TO THE FUTURE is plainly there in the title – it's *to get back to the future*. In a way, as soon as Marty realises he's in 1955, he wants to get back home to 1985. Marty realises the only way he can do this is with the help of the younger Doc Brown. And indeed Doc Brown does come up with a 'Plan of Action' based on powering up the DeLorean using the electricity that will be generated in the lightning strike on the clock tower of the Hill Valley courthouse. But powering up the DeLorean is only one of the plot's actions, for BACK TO THE FUTURE is a dual action movie.

The second action of the plot belongs to Marty, and it comes about as a direct result of that accident with the car which led to Homecoming. Marty has inadvertently prevented his mother and father getting together and so Marty's second task is to put right the relationship between his father and his mother that the accident prevented. And that action is essential, for if his mother and father are not brought together, Marty will simply cease to exist. Marty's second 'plan of action' then becomes to ensure his mother and father kiss and fall in love on Prom night.

What then of obstacles to action? Well, for Doc Brown they are many, but mainly practical and technical. His link-up from the clock

tower to the DeLorean repeatedly goes wrong before it finally works at literally the last second. And as soon as the electricity powers up the DeLorean, Marty can return to 1985. As for Marty's obstacles to action, Biff is Marty's primary outright Antagonist, for Biff takes a dislike to Marty pretty much as soon as he meets him. But Biff isn't Marty's only obstacle, for Marty's mother Lorraine has fallen for him and in a way she is the main problem in Marty's second plan of action because Marty must somehow turn his father into a hero in order for his mother to fall in love him. Marty does eventually succeed in doing this and the climax of the mother/father action leads to an irreversible change.

And there's a further action not mentioned so far. Those terrorists in 1985 shot Doc Brown, and even though Marty gives Doc a letter in 1955 outlining what will happen to him in 1985, the Doc refuses to read it. Or at least that's what he says. In fact, he does read it and so wears a bullet proof vest. Yes, the terrorists shot Doc but the strategic action of giving Doc Brown the letter does pay off. He lives. Another Climax and another irreversible change. At least until the sequels.

The point of all this plot detail is that when you look at BACK TO THE FUTURE the entire plot is built from three simple Catalyst Events that can happen in everyday life – an unexpected arrival, an accident and a homecoming.

Some famous lines from BACK TO THE FUTURE…

DOC BROWN: Don't worry. As long as you hit that wire with the connecting hook at precisely 88 miles per hour, the instant the lightning strikes the tower... everything will be fine.

MARTY: Doc, you're my only hope.

MARTY: Jesus, George, it was a wonder I was even born.

GEORGE: Lorraine. My density has brought me to you.

MARTY: Wait a minute, Doc, are you telling me that my mother has got the hots for me?"

DOC BROWN: There's that word again! Heavy! Why are things so heavy in the future? Is there a problem with the Earth's gravitational pull?

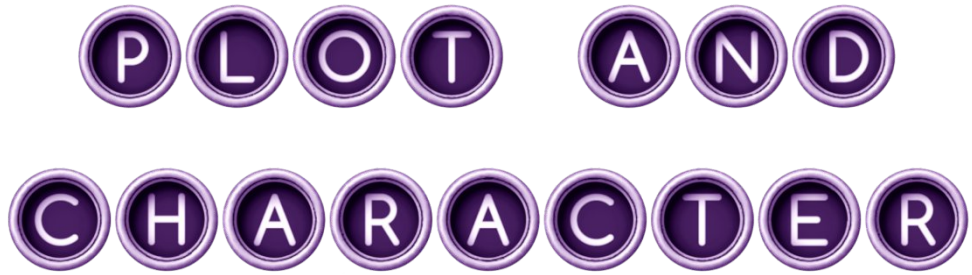
DOC BROWN: The way I see it if you're going to build a time machine into a car, why not do it with some style

DOC BROWN: If my calculations are correct, when this baby hits 88 miles per hour... you're gonna see some serious s*!***

MARTY: I guess you guys aren't ready for that yet. But your kids are gonna love it.

The BACK TO THE FUTURE movies were directed by Robert Zemeckis, with screenplay by Robert Zemeckis and Bob Gale





The Essentials of Plot – The Inciting Incident

"The Inciting Incident is how you get (characters) to do something. It's the doorway through which they can't return, you know. The story takes care of the rest."
Donald Miller

The Inciting Incident

The inciting incident is a story's first plot point or turning point and it's the trigger for action that kick-starts the plot. Other names for it are the Incept and, in myth theory, the 'Call to Adventure'. Phrases associated with Inciting Incident include 'The story's getting going', 'It's kicked off now' and, famously, 'Your mission, should you choose to accept it…' In other words, the fuse is lit…

The writer Steven James, author of NEVER THE SAME, puts what brings about the Inciting incident very well when he says "When I speak to children about writing," I tell them, 'You don't have a story until something goes wrong.'" But an inciting incident requires in practice not only something to have happened to bring about disequilibrium in the Story world – whether it has come from

outside of the character or indeed the inside – but also that that unwelcome event creates motivation and desire to change things and gives rise therefore to the conscious wants of the narrative. And that's what becomes the action of the story. The inciting incident is one of the 'obligatory scenes' in any narrative and the action that follows will eventually lead to another obligatory scene, namely the climax. If an inciting incident asks the question *'How will all this end?'* then the climax answers it by saying *'Like this'*. The two are fundamentally connected.

Some more thoughts on inciting incidents and beginnings…

"Inciting incidents are simply the first important choice the protagonist makes in any story."
John Yorke, INTO THE WOODS

"Every moment is a fresh beginning."
T. S. Eliot

"Do not wait until the conditions are perfect to begin. Beginning makes the conditions perfect."
Alan Cohen

"Celebrate endings – for they precede new beginnings."
Jonathan Lockwood Huie, author

"There will come a time when you believe everything is finished; that will be the beginning."
Louis L'Amour, American novelist

"Nothing is predestined. The obstacles of your past can become the gateways that lead to new beginnings."
Ralph Blum, author

"No matter how hard the past is, you can always begin again."
Buddha

"In every end, there is also a beginning."
Libba Bray, A GREAT AND TERRIBLE BEAUTY



"A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead."
Graham Greene, THE END OF THE AFFAIR

Aristotle's 'Beginning'

What Aristotle called a 'Beginning', we might call an Inciting Incident. For Aristotle, a beginning is something that is not a necessary consequence of something else. Of course, everything is consequence of something, but as we've seen in looking at catalyst events, problems can seemly come from nowhere. Mother Nature being an obvious example. It's important though to remember that Aristotle's POETICS is not a *How to Write a Screenplay* or *How to construct a Novel* sort of book. And when Aristotle is talking about

beginnings, middles and ends, he's doing so in the context of what he calls an *imitation of an action*, which in itself is very abstract in its meaning. Anyway, Aristotle does give us a practical example and that is OEDIPUS REX. In OEDIPUS REX, particular favourite of Aristotle, the disequilibrium (or catalyst event) is the arrival of a plague which leads to Oedipus's decision to ask why the gods have inflicted disease on Thebes and who is ultimately responsible. Oedipus becomes detective and his action is essentially to find out who is to blame for the state Thebes finds itself in, which makes OEDIPUS REX in essence the world's first whodunit? And the guy who done it, as with one of Agatha Christie's most famous stories, turns out to be the detective. And in the case of OEDIPUS REX that's Oedipus himself.

"Infatuation is the Inciting Incident. Maybe it goes somewhere, maybe it doesn't, but you can't have a story without it. Love is the story itself, the thing we carry with us after the mountains are gone."

A. Manette Ansa, America author of VINEGAR HILL



"I'm not much of a plotter. I start off with an inciting incident, and in classic crime fiction what happens is that all the action flows from that incident. It's very comfy when it all ties up and feels like a complete universe, but my stuff doesn't always work that way."
Denise Mina, Scottish crime writer

The Placement of the Inciting Incident

The standard rule with inciting incident is that it should be placed in the narrative as early as possible. However, it is often useful and usual to have some knowledge of characters and setting before this is done. There are, though, examples when the inciting incident happens within a minute or so of the story starting. For example, in the movie SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS. John L. Sullivan is a popular young Hollywood director of commercially successful comedies who decides, within the opening seconds of the film, it's high time to make a film that is serious and explores of the plight of the downtrodden. Sullivan plans, therefore, to travel as a tramp so he can make a movie that truly depicts the sorrows of humanity.

In the majority of movies the Inciting Incident takes place at the end of what you might call the first act, which in practice is around twenty minutes in. However, it is also possible to delay the inciting incident to later in the narrative in order to set-up sub-plots or some sort of secondary plot. Examples of this are the 'letters of transit' plot in CASABLANCA and the Adriana 'Adrian' Pennino love plot in ROCKY.



In THE GODFATHER there are various mini-stories in the opening wedding sequence. One is the initial reluctance of the undertaker to acknowledge Don Corleone as 'Godfather', which is brought to a conclusion with the undertaker's acceptance of Don Corleone when he kisses his ring. Another is a singer's dispute with the head of the studio. This leads to a mini-story in itself which is resolved before the attempted murder of Don Corleone which leads to the main action of the movie, namely Michael becoming involved in his mafia family business, something he said he would never do. But the point here is that this action begins , as a result of the attempted murder on his father, relatively late in the narrative.

"Get your character in trouble in the first sentence and out of trouble in the last sentence."
Barthe DeClements, American author of children's and young adult books



"For those protagonists we tend to admire the most, the Inciting Incident arouses not only a conscious desire, but an unconscious one as well. These complex characters suffer intense inner battles because these two desire are in direct conflict with each other. No matter what the character consciously thinks he wants, the audience senses or realizes that deep inside he unconsciously wants the very opposite."
Robert McKee, story theorist

The Dynamic of the Inciting Incident

Most inciting incidents are pretty clear. The aliens arrive on planet Earth just before Independence Day and start blowing things up. Well, that's an inciting incident that's pretty easy to spot. As is a big wave that turns a ship called *The Poseidon* upside down. That said, what and where is the inciting incident of THE THING (1982) or the disaster movie THE DAY THE EARTH CAUGHT FIRE (1961)?

But the dynamics of an inciting incident do not have to be a big natural disaster or the sudden arrival of monsters from outer space. In the Western HUD, for example, the Inciting Incident is the possibility of foot-and-mouth disease on a farm. And in the related climax there is confirmation of foot-and-mouth disease and two bulls are killed. That's pretty much all that happens plot wise, for HUD is

character study rather than a typical Western adventure movie. It's a story that belongs in the minimalist category of plot and maximum of character.

Another quiet inciting incident that's hardly noticed is in 12 ANGRY MEN. The juror who voted not guilty says, "I have a proposition to make to all of you. I'm gonna call for another vote. I want you eleven men to vote by secret written ballot. I'll abstain. If there are eleven votes for guilty, I won't stand alone. We'll take in a guilty verdict to the judge right now. But if anyone votes not guilty, we stay here and talk it out." The vote is taken and someone does vote not guilty. The fuse then is lit. And there's the action – *stay and talk it out*.

Writers very rarely put an 'X' in the margin where the Inciting Incident marks the spot. Inciting Incidents can develop gradually from Catalyst Events in a way that isn't always perceptible. And besides, the first choice of the protagonist may be to ignore rather than engage with the change that has occurred. The decision to take action may only come later.

'You see, what we're talking about here is an organism that imitates other life forms, and imitates them perfectly. When this Thing attacked our dogs, it tried to digest them. Absorb them. And in the process, shape its own cells to imitate them. This, for instance, that's not dog. That's imitation. We got to it before it had time to finish.'

Blair in THE THING



'You see George, you've really had a wonderful life. Don't you see what a mistake it would be to just throw it away?'
Clarence in IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE

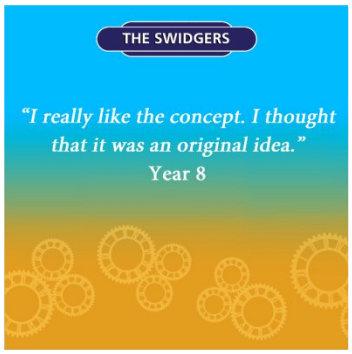
Inciting Incident Design Variation – IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE

The overarching project of IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE is to keep the Building and Loan business going. Nearly all decisions taken by George Bailey in the movie are based on this, and it is, as it were, his super-objective, to use an acting term of Stanislavsky. But if that is the case, what then is the Inciting Incident of IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE?

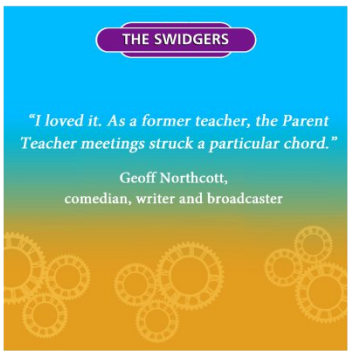
From the start, IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE is narrative where all the plot points don't seem to be in the order you would traditionally expect them. The movie begins, for example, with George Bailey's low point crisis moment, which is George's decision to end his own life so that an impossible financial problem will be solved by his life insurance policy. As we see this, prayers are been sent to Heaven from people who are worried about George Bailey, who is played of course by Jimmy Stewart. The situation then is this: George's Building and Loan business is in crisis, for money has somehow gone missing,

and George has come to the terrible realisation that he is worth more dead than alive.

But back now to those prayers for George. As a result of people being worried about George, an angel called Clarence is called for. Clarence, Angel (Second Class), is then given the task of assisting George overcome his crisis. In order to help Clarence understand who George Bailey is, our Angel (Second Class), is shown a life history of George Bailey, which is essentially George Bailey's Back Story. And this back story section takes up a large chunk of the film.







Once George Bailey's life history is understood, Clarence is then dispatched to Earth on a mission to stop George Bailey from taking his own life at his crisis point. And Clarence does this by jumping into the river, knowing that George, when he sees Clarence drowning, will jump into the river to save him. And Clarence is right and so the crisis moment is averted. But only temporarily, for George's mood is still low and his intention to end his own life hasn't gone away. It's no good stopping George killing himself that one time, Clarence must make sure that George Bailey's decision not to commit suicide is

permanent. Remember those definitions of an 'End' – *after which nothing else can occur* and that which *brings about an absolute and irreversible change*.

Clarence's Action Plan comes as a result of a chance remark that George himself makes when he says that it would have been better if he'd never been born. Being an angel, Clarence, with some help from upstairs, brings this about and so George Bailey finds himself in a world where indeed he has never been born. And it's a vile dystopian world where Bedford Falls has become Pottersville. As Clarence says, "You've been given a great gift, George: A chance to see what the world would be like without you." And George's experience of this world – its self-centredness, its loneliness, its cruelty – all eventually lead to a self-revelation in George that he wants to live again, for it was indeed a better world when he did live. And this moment, this epiphany if you like to call it that, is so fervent, so passionate and so heart-felt – "I wanna live again!" – that there can be no doubt that George Bailey will never think of taking his own life from that moment on.

So that's the tale. But what then is the actual inciting incident of the story?

As said, the key objective of much of the narrative is keeping the Building and Loan business going. The catalyst event here is the death of George Bailey's father. Young George would prefer to leave Bedford Falls and travel but the death of his father means that in

order to keep the Building and Loan Company going, he will have to stay home and become the executive officer. So is this moment the inciting incident?

But then there's the problem with the missing money. The catalyst event is the uncle accidentally losing the $8,000 that he was supposed to deposit in the bank. The mislaying of the money has put the Building and Loan business in jeopardy, so is the need to find the money from somewhere the inciting incident? This plot line has a deadline too, because there is a Bank Examiner due later that day. Yet if the need to balance the books is the Inciting Incident then it's George's wife Mary who takes the problem out of George's hands by ringing round and getting everyone to make a contribution. As Annie amusingly says, "I've been saving this money for a divorce, if ever I get a husband."

Yet none of these is the inciting incident of the movie IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE. To truly understand that you must ask 'What is the *action* of the story?' And clearly the action isn't about finding that $8,000. Nor is it simply keeping the Building and Loan business going. The true key to the story is not the money or the bricks and the mortar. And the clue to the film's true action is there in the title of the movie: IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE. The *action* is to make George Bailey understand *it's a wonderful life*. Yes, in a way the narrative has several Inciting Incidents because there are several actions and story strands. One is keeping the Building and Loan going, the other

concerns the missing money. But neither is what you may call the Action Spine of the story.



The true drive of the tale is surely Clarence's action to save George Bailey from thinking that this wonderful life is not worth living. And so it's the prayers from George's friends that together lead to an intersession from Upstairs and the sending of Clarence, Angel (Second Class), down to Earth. And here there's a story within a story for Clarence wants to earn his wings, and that will happen if she succeeds in his task of convincing George that it is indeed a wonderful life.

It has been said that the inciting incident must be directly related to the crisis and resulting climax. And the crisis in IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE is George's intended suicide, except before he goes ahead, George prays: "Dear Father in Heaven, I'm not a praying man, but if you're up there and you can hear me, show me the way." So it's not just the prayers of those in Bedford Falls, it's George's prayers too. For what IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE is about is how life is still wonderful, even in your darkest hour.

The point of all this is not to go on about what a wonderful movie IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE is – which is obvious to anyone – but to illustrate the complexity sometimes in pinning down 'the Inciting Incident'. Others may have different opinions on what and where the Inciting Incident of IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE is and lies. But let's leave the story gurus to their squabbles. All that really matter are Zuzu's petals. They're back and with them comes the knowledge that it truly is a wonderful life and the most wonderful film.

Some famous lines from IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE…

"Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives. And when he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?"
Clarence

"Teacher says, 'Every time you hear a bell ring, it means that some angel's just got his wings.'"
Zuzu Bailey

"Look, we're still in business! We've still got two bucks left!"
George Bailey

"What is it you want, Mary? What do you want? You want the moon? Just say the word, and I'll throw a lasso around it and pull it down."
George Bailey

"You see George, you really had a wonderful life. Don't you see what a mistake it would be to throw it away?"
Clarence

"I couldn't face being cooped up for the rest of my life in a shabby little office. Oh, I'm sorry Pop, I didn't mean that, but it's this business of nickels and dimes and spending all your life trying to figure out how to save three cents on a length of pipe. I'd go crazy. I want to do something big and something important."
George Bailey

"You've been given a great gift, George, a chance to see what the world would be like without you."
Clarence

"You sit around here and you spin your little webs and you think the whole world revolves around you and your money. Well, it doesn't, Mr. Potter. In the whole vast configuration of things, I'd say you were nothing but a scurvy little spider!"
George Bailey to Mr Potter

"Remember, no man is a failure who has friends."
Clarence

"I want to live again."
George Bailey

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE (1946) was produced and directed by Frank Capra. It was based on the short story THE GREATEST GIFT, which Philip Van Doren Stern self-published in 1943. The screenplay was written by Frances Goodrich, Albert Hackett and Frank Capra.



"Actions are visible, though motives are secret."
Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer

Inciting Incident Design Variation – THE USUAL SUSPECTS

As said, 'X' rarely marks the spot in a margin where the Inciting Incident falls. And even if you can spot where the Inciting Incident is, that event may not turn out to be what it seems. Take THE USUAL SUSPECTS.

The movie THE USUAL SUSPECTS operates like a game of chess, where individual moves are all part of a long term strategy, but it is only in the final move that those that came before are truly understood. And in THE USUAL SUSPECTS that's only in the closing moments of the movie.

The situation at the beginning of THE USUAL SUSPECTS is this. The police have recovered twenty-seven dead bodies from a fire on a boat, most so burnt they are unrecognisable. There are, however, two survivors: Arkosh Kovash, a Hungarian mobster with severe life-threatening burns, and Roger 'Verbal' Kint, a low-life con-artist. The

police interview the very talkative Verbal and come to believe that the career criminal Dean Keaton is in truth Keyser Söze, a near mythical villain who, according to Verbal, is “a spook story that criminals tell their kids at night.”

So what’s the ‘purposeful striving’ or action of THE USUAL SUSPECTS? Well, for the majority of the movie it seems to be the police piecing together what led up the fire and from that puzzle the identity of this monster called Keyser Söze. Verbal fears for his safety, saying that Keyser Söze is probably still out there. It’s only very late in the movie he acknowledges that Dean Keaton is indeed Keyser Söze.



The inciting incident in this case is the bringing in of Verbal for questioning. However, the police’s purposeful striving is not the true action of the film for, in the final moments, it is revealed that it is Verbal who is the true Keyser Söze. The real action of the drama then has been Verbal attempting, and ultimately succeeding, in extricating himself from the police interview by creating an entire fantasy, based on the clippings on the wall in the interview room

Disagree with Dr. Johnson at your peril, but there are occasions when he's wrong – and saying "actions are visible, though motives are secret" is perhaps one of them. Or at least Verbal's actions are only truly understood as the movie ends. The point is that the audience at that moment has to reassess everything they have witnessed. And audiences, on the whole, quite like that sort of twist, which is the ultimate appeal of THE USUAL SUSPECTS.

Some famous lines from THE USUAL SUSPECTS…

"It didn't make sense that I'd be there. I mean, these guys were hard-core hijackers, but there I was. At that point I wasn't scared, I knew I hadn't done anything they could do me for. Besides, it was fun. I got to make like I was notorious."
Verbal

"Keaton always said, 'I don't believe in God, but I'm afraid of him.' Well, I believe in God, and the only thing that scares me is Keyser Scöze."
Verbal

"Who is Keyser Söze? He is supposed to be Turkish. Some say his father was German. Nobody believed he was real. Nobody ever saw him or knew anybody that ever worked directly for him, but to hear Kobayashi tell it, anybody could have worked for Soze. You never knew. That was his power."
Verbal

"A man can convince anyone he's somebody else, but never himself."
Verbal

"First day on the job, you know what I learned? How to spot a murderer. Let's say you arrest three guys for the same killing. You put them all in jail overnight. The next morning, whoever's sleeping is your man. You see, if you're guilty, you know you're caught, you get some rest, you let your guard down."
Dave Kujan

"It was Keyser Söze, Agent Kujan. I mean the Devil himself. How do you shoot the Devil in the back? What if you miss?"
Verbal

"I'm telling you this guy is protected from up on high by the Prince of Darkness."
Jeff Rabin

"And like that he was gone. Underground. Nobody has ever seen him since. He becomes a myth, a spook story that criminals tell their kids at night. 'Rat on your pop, and Keyser Söze will get you.' And no-one ever really believes."
Verbal

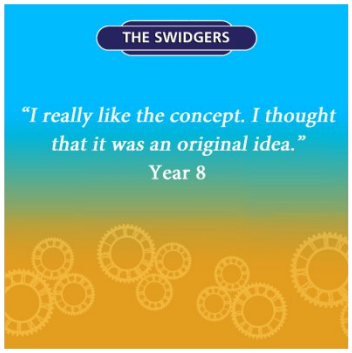
"To a cop the explanation is never that complicated. It's always simple. There's no mystery to the street, no arch criminal behind it all. If you got a dead body and you think his brother did it, you're gonna find out you're right.
Verbal

"Get your rest, Gentlemen. The boat will be ready for you on Friday. If I see you or any of your friends before then, Miss. Finneran will find herself the victim of a most gruesome violation before she dies. As will your father, Mr. Hockney. And your Uncle Randall in Arizona, Mr. Kint. I might only castrate Mr. McManus's nephew, David. Do I make myself clear?"
Kobayashi

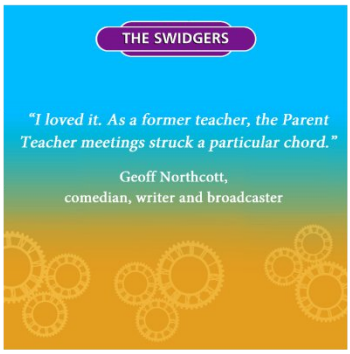
"After that my guess is that you will never hear from him again. The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he did not exist. And like that... he is gone."

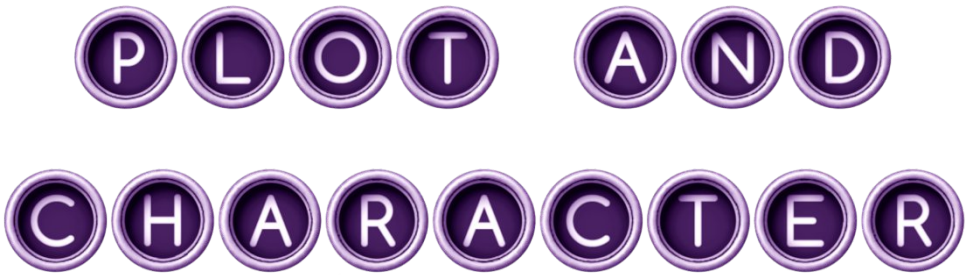
Verbal

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









The Essentials of Plot – Protagonist and Antagonist

"All good plots come from well-orchestrated characters pitted against one another in a conflict of wills."
James N. Frey, American writer and creative writing teacher

Protagonist and Antagonist

'Protagonist' comes from the Greek word (*prōtagōnistēs*), formed from *prōtos* (meaning 'first in importance') and *agōnistēs* (meaning 'combatant'). 'Antagonist' originates from the Greek *antagōnizesthai* 'to struggle against'. Protagonist has now come to mean the main figure in a situation or drama. However, the distinctions in the original meanings are worth exploring briefly.

In any story probably the best way to decide which is the protagonist and which is the antagonist is to ask 'Who initiates the action or mission?' In this sense, the character of John McClane may be the hero of DIE HARD but he's technically not the protagonist or

'combatant'. That's Hans Gruber, for he is the one with the plan for the heist. McClane on the other hand is the one who 'struggles against'. That said, to overstate this academic and somewhat pedantic etymological distinction when most people simply use Protagonist/Hero Antagonist/Villain interchangeably can cause confusion. But, as there once was a specific distinction between the two, it is at least worth mentioning.

Perhaps though the more important here is what Alfred Hitchcock always said about the villain and that is "The more successful the villain, the more successful the picture." In other words, the more fascinating and original your forces of antagonism, the more dynamic will be your story.

Some thoughts on protagonists…

"There has to be a protagonist who has to overcome challenges, and there will be a race to finish."
Ashwin Sanghi, writer

"Don't just write a strong female protagonist. Be one."
A.D. Posey, poet

"What was the point of having a situation worthy of fiction if the protagonist didn't behave as he would have done in a book?"
Julian Barnes, THE SENSE OF AN ENDING

"We only see female protagonists who are likeable, with one cute flaw, such as adorable clumsiness. I'm fed up with it."

Catherine Reitman



"Give a smile to your enemies and they will go mad wondering what you are plotting against them."
Amit Abraham, Indian academician, author, and psychologist

Conflict and the Forces of Antagonism

An important point repeatedly made by story gurus about the rotagonist-Antagonist relationship is that they are often mirror opposites. One well-know story guru, Christopher Vogler, talks not so much about the antagonist, but instead, taking his cue from Carl Jung and his theory of archetypes, uses the term 'Shadow'. And it's called the shadow because an antagonist is essentially created from the same basic shape as the hero, only negative and darker. And in many stories the shadow's values and way of thinking are designed to be the inverse and diametrical opposite of the hero's values. Take Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) and Warden Norton (Bob Gunton) in THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION based on RITA HAYWORTH AND THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION by Stephen King. Although Andy is the prisoner and Norton is the warden, it is the morality and ethical principles of Andy that become the shining beacon of the story.



The most iconic 'Shadow' in a time travel tale is truly an inverse of the hero because this antagonist is not even human, but an android – the Model 101 Terminator. The 101 has only one primary task: to kill John Connor. And John Connor has one task too: to keep alive the mother of John Connor in order that the rebel leader of the resistance against the androids of the future may be born. And there are many other stark contrasts in popular movies such as the Emperor Palpatine and Luke Skywalker, Nurse Ratched and Randle McMurphy, the Sherriff of Nottingham and Robin Hood, plus, of course, Voldemort and Harry Potter.

But sometimes writers want to show that apparent opposites are not that opposite at all. In the thriller TICKER, TAYLOR SOLDIER SPY, the spymaster George Smiley observes that "We spend our time looking for the weakness in each other's system." And you could add as far as George and Karla are concerned in SMILEY'S PEOPLE there is a personal aspect as well, for in that story they spend their time looking for the weakness in each other's character. Another example would be THE SEARCHERS, where both the hero and shadow are so

very much alike. Think too of the dark inverse of Batman and the Joker. Are they really that different?



In Story Craft terms it's always useful to allow the Shadow to express their values, even if they are wicked. And important too, that the Shadow has their own Back Story, their own emotional hurt, which at least explains in part why it is they think and act as they do. That said, of course, an explanation is never an excuse.

Some more thoughts on antagonists…

"A stage play is basically a form of uber-schizophrenia. You split yourself into two minds – one being the Protagonist and the other being the Antagonist. The playwright also splits himself into two other minds: the mind of the writer and the mind of the audience."
David Mamet, playwright

"Protagonists and their stories can only be as fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them."
Robert McKee

"Every antagonist is a protagonist in his own right."
Puneet Issar, Indian actor, writer, director and producer

"I tend to write very idealistically and very romantically… I have a very bad time with bad guys. Almost as soon as I write one, I start writing them to become a good guy. What happens is I really like the actor and I want them to be part of the gang. It's a terrible habit… I'm crazy about BREAKING BAD, but I wouldn't know how to write an episode of it."
Aaron Sorkin, screenwriter



"I'm more comfortable writing traditional protagonists. But STEVE JOBS and THE SOCIAL NETWORK have anti-heroes. I like to write anti-heroes as if they're making their case to God about why they should be allowed into heaven. I have to find something in that character that is like me and write to that."
Aaron Sorkin

Joint Protagonists, Multi-protagonists, Disappearing Protagonists and Passive Protagonists

Sometimes you can have joint or dual protagonists as in THELMA & LOUISE and BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID. Then there are the team mission stories such as INDEPENDENCE DAY, where there are several protagonists. Interestingly, INDEPENDENCE DAY covers various areas of American society in its spectrum of

protagonists, with the WASP President, the Jewish scientist, the African-American military Captain and the Hillbilly civilian.

Another type of multi-protagonists is the political collective as in OCTOBER: TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD, the 1928 Soviet silent historical film written and directed by Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Aleksandrov. OCTOBER is a celebratory dramatisation of the 1917 October Revolution, but it has no individual protagonist as such. The 'Protagonist' here is 'The People'.

Where there are inter-connecting or interrelating stories such as in PULP FICTION there are multi-protagonists in the sense that several protagonists each have their own individual action. Classic examples of this in literature are the novels of Leo Tolstoy (WAR AND PEACE, ANNA KERENINA) and Victor Hugo (LES MISÉRABLES), plus, of course, Charles Dickens' BLEAK HOUSE. There can also be multi-protagonists that are linked more by theme, as in TRAFFIC, where the protagonists never meet.



Unusually you can even have a disappearing protagonist. This happens in the movie PSYCHO. People forget that this Hitchcock

classic start out with real estate secretary Marion Crane and her boyfriend Sam Loomis discussing their inability to get married because of Sam's debts. To solve the problem, Marion steals $40,000 entrusted to her for deposit, and sets off to drive to Sam's home in California. En route, Marion trades in her car, arousing suspicion from both the car dealer and a California highway patrol officer. It's only then that Marion stops for the night at the Bates Motel. The story seems to be about a woman who steals money in order to make a new life with her lover. Only suddenly she disappears from the story. Or rather she is murdered in the shower. Hitchcock cleverly understood that psychologically once the protagonist is killed the audience would switch empathy to the only other character around. Norman Bates.

Not all stories have active protagonists who single-mindedly pursue their goal. L'AVVENTURA is a 1960 Italian drama film directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, developed from a story by Antonioni with co-writers Elio Bartolini and Tonino Guerra. The film seems to be about the disappearance of a young woman, Anna, during a boating trip in the Mediterranean, and the action is the subsequent search for her by her lover and her best friend. Only the focus changes, and interest in the search fades. In fact Anna is never seen again and her disappearance is not ever explained.

"The traveller was active; he went strenuously in search of people, of adventure, of experience. The tourist is passive; he expects interesting things to happen to him. He goes 'sight-seeing.'"
Daniel J. Boorstin



"I tend to favour films that have multiple plot and story lines, multiple characters and ensemble pieces."
Spike Lee, filmmaker

Are There Stories Without a Protagonist?

Is it possible to have a story without a protagonist? Well, sort of, but not really. There is a plot type known as 'the pebble that creates the ripples'. As with a stone thrown into a still pond where undulating waves are then sent out from the centre, there are plots where one event or action triggers a series of responses from a diverse group of characters. In this sort of multi-strand plot but there is no lone, single or even joint protagonist as such. However, that initial disturbance in the status quo does create reactions in the characters and those actions can lead to conflict with opposing characters. In this sense there are a series of stories created, each with their own protagonist and antagonist that may also interact with the protagonists and antagonists of the other tales. An example

of this is THE ALLEYS (2021), a crime caper set in a labyrinth of alley in East Amman. A blackmailer with incriminating videos on his mobile phone sets off a series of events, some which are connected, others which are not so, that spiral into growing chaos and which affect many of the lives in the close-knit community.

"One of the reasons why I think virtual reality, as a narrative format, is never going to go beyond the short-form immersion space is because the bedrock of visual storytelling is the reverse angle. If you can't look into the eyes of the protagonist, you cannot hold people's attention for more than fifteen minutes."
Steven Soderbergh, movie director



Some final thoughts on protagonists…

"In most films – especially in regards to the protagonist – really from the get-go they set up some scenario that endears that character to the audience. Or imbues him with some nobility or heroism or something."
Joaquin Phoenix, actor

"The leading character isn't always the most important or interesting character; when people think that the protagonist is the character portrayed, it's people who haven't read Shakespeare."
Pilou Asbaek, Danish actort

"There's a bizarre insistence on how a story should be. 'The protagonist must be sympathetic!' they say. Whatever that means. I never engage in that discussion. I never use that word, 'sympathetic.' I just know 'interesting.'"
Alexander Payne, American film director, screenwriter and producer

"The writer must be a participant in the scene... like a film director who writes his own scripts, does his own camera work, and somehow manages to film himself in action, as the protagonist or at least the main character."
Hunter S. Thompson, American journlist

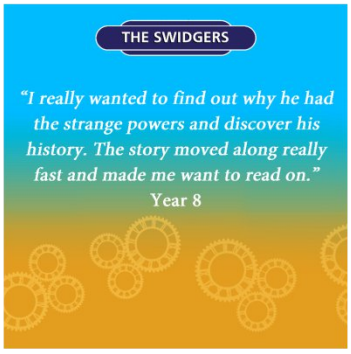
"The main question in drama, the way I was taught, is always, 'What does the protagonist want?' That's what drama is. It comes down to that. It's not about theme, it's not about ideas, it's not about setting, but what the protagonist wants."
David Mamet, playwright

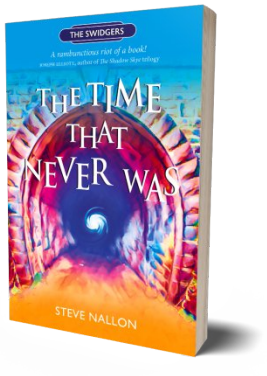
"Your protagonist is your reader's portal into the story. The more observant he or she can be, the more vivid will be the world you're creating. They don't have to be super-educated, they just have to be mentally active. Keep them looking, thinking, wondering, remembering."
Janet Fitch, American author of the novel WHITE OLEANDER

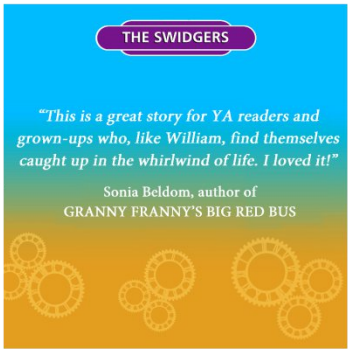
"I always find something in common with my protagonist, particularly when I write in the first person."
Emily Giffin (Emily Frisk Giffin American author of several novels commonly categorized as 'chick lit'

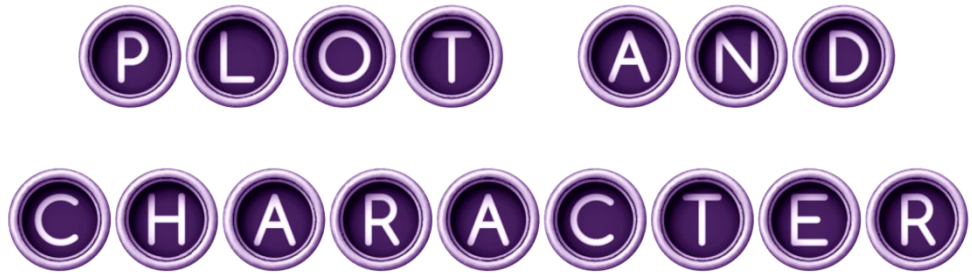
"You don't really understand an antagonist until you understand why he's a protagonist in his own version of the world."
John Rogers, writer of DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS

"We often know only one version of the story... the version portrayed by the person who wins a war and lives to tell the tale, and the one who loses a war is always remembered as the 'Antagonist' making the victor the 'Protagonist.'
Puneet Issar, Indian actor, writer, director and producer









The Essentials of Plot – Causality

"The structure of any dramatic form should be a syllogism – which is a logical construct of this form: If A, then B. A play or movie proceeds from a statement: 'If A' (in which a condition of unrest is created or posited), to a conclusion: 'then B' (at which time entropy will once again rear its corrective head, and a condition of rest will have been once again achieved)."
David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM

Causality and Sequential Events

Causality is a difficult sounding term and that can be a worry. As Winnie the Pooh said, "I am a bear of very little brain, and long words bother me." In life, one thing happens, then another thing happens. But there are times when the thing that happened only happened because of the thing that came before. One thing was a direct consequence of the others. E.M. Forster said, *'The king died and then the queen died'* is not a plot but *'The king died, and then the queen dies of grief'* is a plot. The queen didn't just die after the king's death, she died *because of it*. And in a plot things have to be a consequence of what happened before it.

Usually in a plot, one event not only causes another event but in fact leads to an entire chain of events, like one domino falling causes a whole line of dominoes to fall. And people, when telling you a story, will often make clear its causal links. They'll begin by saying, "What happened was this…" but as the story goes on connections between events will be made – "and then she said that, which meant she then had to… and as a result of that, he was obliged to… and so after that she was forced to… which meant he had no choice but to… and that's why, in the end, they all ended up in Scarborough." There's certainly a causally linked story there, all you have do is fill in the blanks.

KING LEAR: Be your tears wet? yes, faith. I pray, weep not:
If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me; for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong:
You have some cause, they have not.
CORDELIA: No cause, no cause.
From KING LEAR, by William Shakespeare



"That the Sun will not rise Tomorrow is no less intelligible a Proposition and implies no more contradiction than the Affirmation that it will rise. We should in vain, therefore, attempt to demonstrate its falsehood."
David Hume, AN ENQUIRY CONCERNING HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

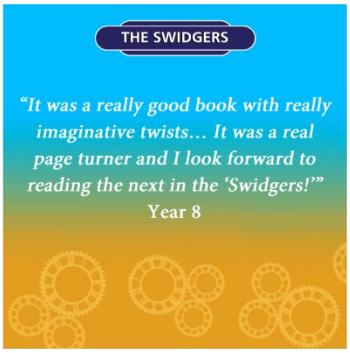
David Hume and Causality

Making connections between events and happenings is how we make sense of our lives. And we do it every day. Early in THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, first in the SWIDGERS Time Adventure series, William witnesses a strange strike of ice from the sky on a church roof. This strike results in tiles falling and an electric cable being severed. The falling ice is later explained in a newspaper report to be the result of lightning on an aeroplane that loosened the built up ice on its under-carriage. But when William saw the electric cables they were, in his mind, more like living snakes – and this weirdness makes him believe that all he witnessed was not only connected but intended:

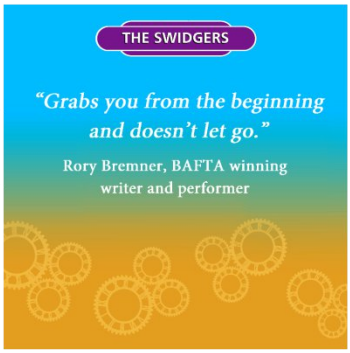
> And then there was what that newspaper said. The lightning strike on the plane. The ice that struck. The tiles that fell. The cable that split. One thing following another. As if intended. And as for that snake. Yes, it was only a cable, yet it seemed so alive.
>
> As if it knew what it was doing.
>
> As I got dressed that morning, I had no answers, but there'd come a day when I would. Forgive me, I jump ahead again. Better to tell my tale as it happened and not as it came to be understood. And I do this as much for myself as

for you. For isn't it sometimes in the very telling of our story that we come to understand it?

William, who is the narrator of his own story in SWIDGERS, chooses not to give the game away too soon. However, in book two, THE TIME THEY SAVED TOMORROW, it is revealed that William was right to make those connections. And he was also right about the strike being intentional.







Later in book one, THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, William makes another connection and that is between the static shocks that the Brown Owls get from a train door and a mysterious man further down the platform holding his hand against the train. Once on the train, William expresses his concerns to Granny, his mentor figure. But Granny warns him not to make the mistake of making too many connections. "A clever Scotsman once observed," she tells William, "that when something follows something else it doesn't necessarily mean it's because of that something else." And the clever Scotsman she was talking about was none other than the philosopher David

Hume. And as it happens, on this occasion, it is Granny who is proved right.

The cornerstone of Hume's understanding of how human knowledge is gained is the problem of induction, or what justifies the conclusions of our observations. And it's in this area that Hume is most sceptical about human powers of reason. You only have to look at the history of medicine, where once patients were bled by attaching leeches to them, to see his point.



Essentially, Hume claimed that all of our knowledge about the world is based on our knowledge of cause and effect, yet all of that knowledge is based ultimately only on observation. "I shall venture to affirm," writes Hume in AN ENQUIRY INTO HUMAN UNDERSTANDING, "as a general proposition, which admits of no exception, that the knowledge of this relation [cause and effect] is not, in any instance, attained by reasonings a priori; but arises entirely from experience, when we find, that any particular objects are constantly conjoined with each other… Here is a billiard ball lying on the table, and another ball moving toward it with rapidity. They

strike; the ball which was formerly at rest now acquires a motion. This is as perfect an instance of the relations of cause and effect as any which we know either by sensation or reflection." Hume's basic point is that if you had never seen a billiard ball, you wouldn't have the slightest notion what would happen if one were to hit another. Only life experience can tell you that. For all you know in your prior-to-experience state, the second ball hitting the first might result in it exploding or even cracking open to reveal a baby bunny rabbit inside. It's only after repeated empirical observation that we form the idea of the causal connection that the second hitting the first will result in the first ball moving.

Where all this gets interesting and useful from a Story Craft point of view is that we often 'storyfy' life by making causal connection between events and happenings. It's a natural human way of thinking about the world. And it can be very useful in writing detective fiction, or indeed any type of mystery. An event happens then another event happens after it. In your classic whodunit? someone, somewhere along the line, often the detective herself, makes the mistake of assuming a causal connection between the two events when in fact there never was one. The detective and everyone else (except the murderer) simply misinterpret what actually happened. And often that was the intention of the murderer – the magician's trick of misdirection. It's only when the detective thinks like David Hume and the misinterpretation or false assumption

is seen for what it truly is that the murderer is uncovered. The moral of the tale is: *Nothing is ever what it seems.*

"To be stories at all they must be a series of events: but it must be understood that this series – the plot, as we call it – is only really a net whereby to catch something else."
C.S. Lewis, writer



"Belief in the causal nexus is superstition."
Ludwig Wittgenstein, TRACTATUS LOGICO-PHILOSOPHICUS

Sub-version of Causality

71 FRAGMENTS OF A CHRONOLOGY OF CHANCE, CACHÉ and THE WHITE RIBBON are all movies by the Austrian film director and screenwriter, Michael Haneke. His films are known for eschewing moral clarity and certainty of any kind. They are brooding and stark in style which bring with them a sense of dread and fear. And Haneke's films are rarely tales that involve narrative connections in the traditional sense. In fact, you could argue they intentionally subvert the very notion of causality.

UN CHIEN ANDALOU (*An Andalusian Dog*) is the 1929 Franco-Spanish surrealist short film created by the artist Salvador Dalí and

the Spanish director Luis Buñuel. The title UN CHIEN ANDALOU comes from the Spanish saying, '*the Andalusian dog howls-someone has died!*' but the scenes themselves are disjointed and seemingly unconnected. Time means nothing, and the title cards jump around between 'once upon a time', 'eight years later' and 'sixteen years ago'. UN CHIEN ANDALOU was inspired by Freudian theories around the concept of dream logic, where there is little causality, at least not the sort of causality we experience in the working world. Both Buñuel and Dalí were keen to avoid what might be considered rational. The only rule, said Buñuel, was that "no idea or image that might lend itself to a rational explanation of any kind would be accepted."



Other film makers, writers and creatives who have a distinctly ambivalent attitude towards causality include Darren Aronofsky, THE FOUNTAIN (2006) and MOTHER! (2017), Jean-Luc Godard, WEEKEND (1967), William Burroughs, who chopped up his texts and then arbitrarily shuffled them about, and David Bowie, who did much the

same with his song lyrics. Quentin Tarantino and Guy Ritchie certainly enjoy playing with notions of causality and narrative order, yet their movies nevertheless still carry a causal thread.

"The law of causality, I believe, like much that passes muster among philosophers, is a relic of a bygone age, surviving, like the monarchy, only because it is erroneously supposed to do no harm."
Bertrand Russell, philosopher



'Leaping about in time, I've found that there are some things in life that I can't change, and there are some things that I can. To save a life, to change a heart, to make the right choice. I guess that's what life's about: Making the right choice at the right time.'
Sam in QUANTUM LEAP

Causality in Time Travel Stories

Causality is particularly important in time travel stories because causality and consequence are often at the heart of a plot where the Plan of Action is to re-set a timeline. Often in Time Travel Tales there's what can be called the 'Endangered Future' plot where a time traveller comes from the future to the present in order to alter events so that the world they came from is saved. It's there in the

popular U.S. television series TRAVELERS (using the American spelling of the title), the Korean time adventure series SIJIPEUSEU: THE MYTH (SISYPHUS), plus, of course, and THE TERMINATOR and STAR TREK IV: THE VOYAGE HOME.

A question that comes up in time travel yarns is how can you be sure of the domino effect of your action and the consequences it may or may not bring about? This is solved in QUANTUM LEAP by the project's supercomputer, Ziggy via Al, who is to some degree able to tell Sam of the historical consequences of his intervention. Marty in BACK TO THE FUTURE gets round the whole conundrum of possible futures by happening to have a photograph in his pocket of him with his family in the future. It's when Marty is furthest from completing his goal that his family members begin to fade one by one. In TIMELESS, the historian Lucy Preston can't actually say for sure what will happen, but her academic knowledge at least offers a guide to the potential consequences of the team's action.

'Now, remember. According to my theory, you interfered with your parents' first meeting. If they don't meet, they won't fall in love, they won't get married and they won't have kids. That's why your older brother's disappearing from that photograph. Your sister will follow, and unless you repair the damage, you'll be next.'
Doc Brown to Marty in BACK TO THE FUTURE



Some more thoughts on causality…

"Reasoning about causes and effects is a very difficult thing, and I believe the only judge of that can be God. We are already hard put to establish a relationship between such an obvious effect as a charred tree and the lightning bolt that set fire to it, so to trace sometimes endless chains of causes and effects seems to me as foolish as trying to build a tower that will touch the sky."
Umberto Eco, THE NAME OF THE ROSE

"Shallow men believe in luck or in circumstance. Strong men believe in cause and effect."
Ralph Waldo Emerson, American essayist, lecturer and philosopher

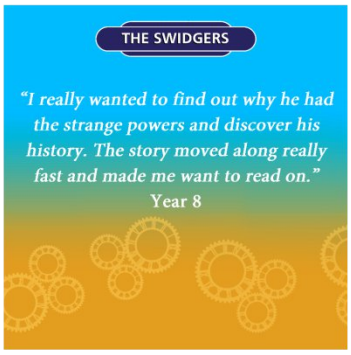
"Causality = Correlation + Assumptions"
J.N. Berkemeijer

"One could make the case that our love of plot – until it gets very cheap indeed – comes out of our need to find the chain of cause and effect that so often is missing in our own existence."
Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

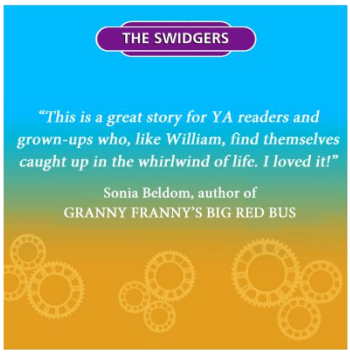
"It is true that in quantum theory we cannot rely on strict causality. But by repeating the experiments many times, we can finally derive from the observations statistical distributions, and by repeating such series of experiments, we can arrive at objective statements concerning these distributions."
Werner Heisenberg, sceintist

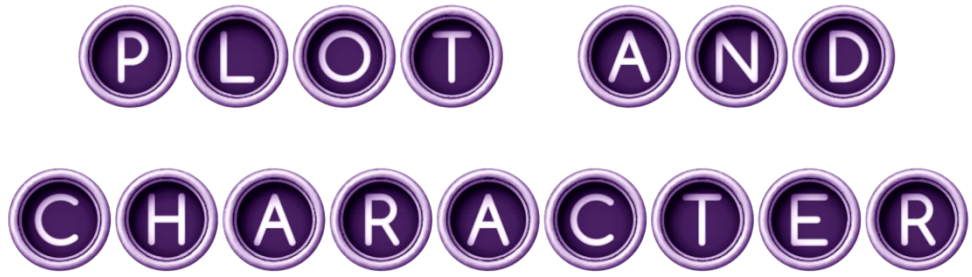
"Anyone who has trouble imagining causality as magical and uncanny need only consider the existence of children."
Timothy Morton, philosopher and academic

"The story is the essential progression of incidents that occur to the hero in pursuit of his goal… What does the hero want? What hinders him from getting it? What happens if he does not get it?"
David Mamet









The Essentials of Plot – Action and Method

'Into the woods
Who knows what may
Be lurking, on the journey?
Into the woods
To get the thing
That makes it worth
The journeying
Into the woods
To see the King
To sell the cow
To make the potion
To see
To sell
To get
To bring
To make
To lift
To go to the Festival!
Into the woods!
Into the woods!
Into the woods
Then out of the woods
And home before it's dark!'

The Prologue song from INTO THE WOODS written by Stephen Sondheim

What is Action?

Action must be a verb. The characters in Sondheim and Lapine's INTO THE WOODS from very early on establish their wishes, wants and needs – and all are verbs, or 'doing words', as many of us were taught at school.

But what about passive words such as 'waiting', as in the play WAITING FOR GODOT? And then there's reflecting, considering and wondering. Aren't they 'doing words' too, even if you do them sitting still? Actually all these seemingly non-activity verbs do lead to actions of various kinds in movies and stories ranging from the meditative and contemplative BRIEF ENCOUNTER and THE CONVERSATION to the mindscreen dramas SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE and TO THE LIGHTHOUSE.

A word here about dreams. For thought experienced as action is one way of defining what a dream is. There are, of course, hundreds of dream stories, plays, movies and novels. Plus, of course, those thoughts experienced as action when we daydream.

"My dad would tell me bedtime stories, and he used to always leave them open-ended and finish at a crucial point with the words 'Dream on'. It was my responsibility to finish the story as I was drifting off to sleep. We would call them dreaming stories."
Hannah Kent, Australian writer



'Actions speak louder than words.'
Common Proverb

Understanding What Action Can Be

Hamlet says, "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature." Henry V took a more aggressive approach to his concept of action: "Then imitate the action of the tiger; / Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood, / Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage." Ralph Waldo Emerson in THE POET speaks of action more as Hamlet does: "Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words." And then there's Cecil B. De Mille's famous imperative, "Lights! Camera! Action!" Each of these quotations offer a different understanding of what 'Action' is.



Let's begin by looking at that well-known proverb '*Actions speak louder than words*'. The saying makes a distinction between what people say and what people do, and essentially asserts that doing has more clout than mere saying. But, as the American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson points out, words too can be thought of as actions. And this is certainly the case in the work of dramatists such as Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen and more lately David Mamet.



Hamlet's advice to the Players is more about combining speech and physical actions, such as movement and gesture, in a way that would be considered 'natural'. Shakespeare's soldier King, Henry V, on the other hand seems to see 'Action' as something like 'a way of behaving that is similar of the tiger, and distinguished by toughness and aggression'. Finally, there is that command from that famous early filmmaker Cecil B. De Mille, he of THE TEN COMMANDMENTS, KING OF KINGS and SAMSON AND DELILAH, where his "Lights! Camera! Action!" instruction tells his performers and crew to begin the kind of dramatic action early Hollywood specialised in, namely

the thrilling ‘action-packed’ story of daring escapes and combat which featured heavily in his historical epics.

‘Action’ then has many meanings and applications, and each has their part to play in the craft of Story.

“All drama is conflict. Without conflict, you have no action; without action, you have no character; without character, you have no story; and without story, you have no screenplay.”
Sid Field



“What drama shows us – most of the time – is what people are saying to other people, which usually means what they’re doing. After all, in the original Greek, ‘doing’ is what drama means.”
David Edgar, HOW PLAYS WORK

Action and Purpose

A person on stage, or screen, or for that matter in a novel, may be involved in some sort of activity – sweeping the floor, painting the walls, looking out of a window – but that activity in and of itself is not enough to qualify it as dramatic action. Just doing is not enough, for activity without dramatic purpose is not plot or drama. However, once we know, for example, that the person looking out the window,

alertly and impatiently, is waiting for her girlfriend to arrive so she can end their lengthy relationship, well, then we have the beginnings of something more dramatic. The activity of looking out of the window now becomes ‘Action’, as it is imbued with purpose and intent. Plus, of course, the waiting, from the audience’s or reader’s point of view, creates suspense.



The idea of purpose and intent, then, is at the heart of the dramatic concept of action. And what makes action in this sense dramatically arresting and significant is not its physical dimensions, but the nature of the action animating it. What this means is that an action as simple as the turning away of her head might, in context, be considered dramatically strong. Stronger in fact than a long car chase in a movie, which, even with its spectacle, has a dramatic action that is weaker.



'Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;
Or close the wall up with our English dead.'
Henry in HENRY V by William Shakespeare

Visible Action: To Do and to See Done

There's no doubt that the sentiment behind the proverb '*actions speak louder than words*' is, on the face of it, in tune with how the medium of drama and theatre has always been perceived and understood. After all, the very word 'drama' derives from the Greek verb *dran*, meaning 'to do'. And something seen done has a direct connection with the word 'theatre', which comes from the Greek *theatron*, meaning 'a seeing place'. Of course, 'things done', 'events', 'happenings' are intrinsic to all the narrative arts, be they presented in novels, short stories and even poems. An accomplished writer could certainly present the confrontation between Hamlet and the ghost of his father with vigour and excitement with only words, but in Shakespeare's tragedy the audience witnesses that encounter as it happens. This immediacy in the representation of events is why Aristotle, in his POETICS, rated dramatic imitation (*mimesis*) more highly than the narrative imitation of Homeric epic,

since he perceived that living theatre created a more powerful kind of likeness to what was being imitated. But of course others say they prefer the radio "because the pictures are better" and the same goes for the mind's eye when reading a book.

"Drama is action, sir, action and not confounded philosophy."
Luigi Pirandello, playwright



"I love movies with spectacle, but spectacle can be a performance, it doesn't have to be a creature."
J.J. Abrams, movie director

Action as Spectacle

Although Shakespeare uses the Chorus to apologise in HENRY V for the inadequacies of "this wooden O" (that is, the Globe Theatre) in representing the great conflict between England and France, there can be no doubt that the scenes of military pageantry and the skirmishes on the field of battle, in HENRY V as well as in others of his plays, were tremendously popular with audiences of the time. Even if the playwright – and perhaps some of the audience – were conscious of the physical limitations of the stage in presenting this kind of dramatic action.

The fundamental connection between the idea of theatre and seeing, (*theatron*, as said, meaning 'a seeing place') has always found popular expression in the demand for spectacle and exciting activity on stage. Audiences, especially in the popular tradition of theatre, have prized those moments of breathtaking action such as the clashing of swords, the shooting of pistols or the dramatic escape by means of a swinging rope. The English Renaissance stage and the melodramatic tradition of the nineteenth century were both rich in such episodes. In fact, as stage machinery and lighting became more elaborate, the nineteenth-century theatre became able to stage sensational events such as train crashes and shipwrecks. But no sooner had the theatre achieved the technological capacity for staging such action than the newly established cinema demonstrated its intrinsic superiority in this respect. Subsequently, the modern appetite for spectacular 'action' drama of this kind has largely been met by film and, to some extent, on the stage, by the modern musical. MISS SAIGON has its helicopter scene, LES MISERABLES its revolutionary barricade set and THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA has its falling chandelier. Each offers a feast for the eye and the senses, though it should be said that this kind of theatre is designed largely for theatrical effect rather than any significant dramatic purpose.

But it's on the wide cinema screen where 'Action Spectacle' comes into its own. The car chase sequence through the hilly streets of San Francisco in BULLITT, the lyrical, slow-motion blood-shedding

in the shoot-out in BONNIE AND CLYDE – these are just two memorable landmarks in a continuing history of cinematic innovation in meeting the audience taste for the visual pleasure of 'Action Spectacle'. However, in the context of its relationship to the plot the action of the car chase takes up a disproportionate length of screen time and the very fact that slow-motion is used in BONNIE AND CLYDE illustrates the desire to extend the visuals on camera. That said, there is one film where the car chase is in balance with the dramatic action and that is THE FRENCH CONNECTION. Here, Popeye Doyle's willingness to kill innocent pedestrians in his pursuit of the drug dealers perfectly reflects his prime action (or plot action) in the action of the car chase.



But what of books and novels? Well, if you doubt written fiction can do 'Action Spectacle' then just read Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes story THE SIGN OF FOUR. Here is just a short excerpt from the boat chase sequence but I'm sure it will leave you wanting more:

'She is very fast,' he said. 'I doubt if we shall catch her.'

'We must catch her!' cried Holmes, between his teeth.
'Heap it on, stokers! Make her do all she can! If we burn the boat we must have them!'
We were fairly after her now. The furnaces roared, and the powerful engines whizzed and clanked, like a great metallic heart. Her sharp, steep prow cut through the river-water and sent two rolling waves to right and to left of us. With every throb of the engines we sprang and quivered like a living thing. One great yellow lantern in our bows threw a long, flickering funnel of light in front of us. Right ahead a dark blur upon the water showed where the Aurora lay, and the swirl of white foam behind her spoke of the pace at which she was going. We flashed past barges, steamers, merchant-vessels, in and out, behind this one and round the other. Voices hailed us out of the darkness, but still the Aurora thundered on, and still we followed close upon her track.
'Pile it on, men, pile it on! cried Holmes, looking down into the engine-room, while the fierce glow from below beat upon his eager, aquiline face. 'Get every pound of steam you can.'

"Plans are of little importance, but planning is essential."
Winston Churchill



"Good drama has no stage directions. It is the interaction of the characters' objectives expressed solely through what they say to each other – not through what the author says about them. The better the play, the better it will fair on the radio. Put STREETCAR, WAITING FOR GODOT, LONG DAY'S JOURNEY, LEAR on the radio,

and what would you miss? Nothing." **David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS**

Spoken Action

As far as the theatre is concerned, a decisive shift in the balance between actions and words occurred in the late nineteenth century, in the transition from melodrama to modern realism and naturalism pioneered by such dramatists as Ibsen and Chekhov. The epigrammatic wit of Oscar Wilde was one thing, but all that talking was something else. Take, for example, the final few minutes of Ibsen's A DOLL'S HOUSE. In terms of physical action nothing much more happens than that a woman invites her husband to sit down and talk about their life together, at the conclusion of which she leaves, closing the door behind her. But in terms of dramatic action the scene is extraordinarily powerful, and derives precisely from Ibsen's innovation in creating spoken action, driven by Nora's desperate purpose of changing her life, in the course of which things never before discussed are brought to light and a relationship is completely altered, signalled by the mundane but in this context extraordinarily powerful moment where she simply gets up and leaves the house, closing the door behind her. Ibsen had made the great discovery that talk is, or at least can be, action. And Pirandello would later call this 'spoken action' and David Mamet would describe it as 'statement as action'.

Even in the movies, a single word, may speak more powerfully to the soul than physical action. Take, for example, the ending of E.T. THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL. There is an extended 'action sequence', including the boys on the bikes suddenly finding themselves flying through the air, but far more effective dramatically is the quiet climactic action that can found in the exchange of E.T. and Elliot in their words: "Come" and "Stay". Both verbs of course.

E.T.: Come...
Elliot: Stay...
E.T.: [PUTTING HIS FINGER TO HIS HEART] Ouch…
Elliot: [MIMICKING THE SAME ACTION] Ouch…
[THEY EMBRACE, THEN E.T. PUTS HIS GLOWING FINGER TO ELLIOT'S FOREHEAD]
E.T.: I'll... be... right... here.
Elliot: [WITH TEARS] ... bye.
E.T. THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL directed by Steven Spielberg with screenplay by Melissa Mathison

"Good dialogue, then, is a manifestation of behaviour, not an explanation of it. Great dialogue shows us who our characters are. Telling* is *showing – it reveals character."
John Yorke, INTO THE WOODS

"In the narration or recapitulation of serious matters our peers were never said to have 'said' things, but to have 'gone' thing, we ten- and twelve-year-olds thereby recognising a statement as an action. (He goes, 'Get over to your side of the line, or you're out,' and I go, 'I am on my side of the line – it runs from the bench to the water fountain.')
David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS



"Poetry demands a man with a special gift for it, or else one with a touch of madness in him."

Aristotle

Action as Process

It would be more correct to say that Ibsen's discovery that talk could be action was more a 'rediscovery', in that Greek tragic dramatists, as well as Aristotle, had long before understood the power of spoken action. At one point in POETICS Aristotle writes that "plot is the imitation of the action (by 'plot' here I mean the organisation of events)". Aristotle, then, offers a notion of action as the ordering of events around a key experience in the protagonist's life normally associated in tragedy with a change from prosperity and/or happiness to suffering and/or adversity. Understood in this way, an action is not a particular event or events – a thing or things that happen – but an identifiable process in someone's life (perhaps, as in Oedipus's case, their whole life since birth) made up of certain events which have a determinate beginning and a necessary conclusion.

Sophocles knew very well that action could be intensely dramatic rendered as speech, provided that it is infused with

purpose and brings conflict and suspense. In this respect, Sophocles is no different from a contemporary playwright such as David Mamet, who has defined speech in drama as “exacting pursuit”. That said, the theatre of Sophocles was very different to that of David Mamet in one important respect: the theatre of ancient Greece incorporated into its presentations dance, music and song. How these added to the dramas is impossible to say, but if dialogue could be said to be pure ‘speech action’ then dance might be described as pure ‘movement action’ and music possibly as ‘sound action’.

“We become just by performing just action, temperate by performing temperate actions, brave by performing brave action.”
Aristotle



“Love art in yourself, and not yourself in art.”
Konstantin Stanislavski, MY LIFE IN ART

Stanislavski: Acting and Actions

The conception of action that we have extracted from the POETICS is arguably more relevant to the writer than the actor whose primary challenge is the creation of character. Action confronts the actor less in terms of the representation of a life-

process – important though that ultimately is in the effective shaping of a role – than in moment by moment decisions about what a character is feeling and thinking in relation to others, and what it is that the character wants and is seeking to get. In this respect the term 'action', for the modern Western actor, has been formatively defined by Konstantin Stanislavski and handed down through the tradition of actor-training derived from him.



Stanislavski insisted that even if the actor is sitting still and unaccompanied on stage, something must be enacted. And Stanislavski was fascinated by the way in which simple, mundane acts/actions/activities might signal defining moments in a character's life – "A small physical act acquires an enormous inner meaning: the great inner struggle seeks an outlet in such an external act". The putting on of lipstick, for example, before someone arrives. Allied to this was Stanislavski's insight that there are "no physical actions divorced from some desire, some effort in some direction, some objective" and its corollary that internal feeling and desire could be

stimulated by physical activity. Which isn't that far from Hamlet's advice to the Players.

Ultimately, the Aristotelian concept of action as an identifiable part of a life-process and Stanislavski's emphasis on what characters do and say as the expression and achievement of inner impulses and desires coincide in the latter's notion of the 'through line of action' (which is also sometimes translated as the 'through-going action' or the 'through-action'). In the course of rehearsals actors should come to a deeper sense of their fundamental objectives as characters so that "a line gradually emerges as a continuous whole". When this is successfully achieved, the actor will be playing truthful and convincing actions moment by moment but also bringing all of these individual actions together to create a sense of a life-process, an "imitation... of life" as Aristotle put it. Ideally, the dramatist's and the actor's perspectives may then successfully converge.

"It is not enough to discover the secret of a play, its thought and feelings – the actor must be able to convert them into living terms."
Konstantin Stanislavski, CREATING A ROLE



GEORGE: I suppose it would have been better if I'd never been born at all.
CLARENCE: What did you say?
GEORGE: I said 'I'd wish I'd never been born!'
CLARENCE: Oh, you mustn't say things like that. You...wait a minute. Wait a minute. That's an idea. [GLANCES UP TOWARD HEAVEN] What do you think? Yeah, that'll do it. All right. [to GEORGE] You've got your wish. You've never been born.
From IT'S WONDERFUL LIFE, produced and directed by Frank Capra, based on the short story THE GREATEST GIFT (1943) by Philip Van Doren. The screenplay was written by Frances Goodrich, Albert Hackett and Frank Capra

Method and Strategy: The Action Plan

'The play's the thing wherein well catch the conscience of the king.' That is Hamlet's action plan and he calls it 'The Mousetrap'. And later there's the action plan of another character, Polonius, who hides behind an arras to eavesdrop on his daughter and Hamlet. The problem for him is that this seemingly clever wheeze leads to Polonius being heard and then slain. Whereas 'The Mousetrap' confirms in Hamlet's mind his uncle's guilt, the action plan of Polonius's leads to his own death. Hoist by his own petard, as Hamlet puts it. Not such a good wheeze after all.

What we have been talking about here then is a ruse, a scheme, a strategy. In other words, a specific plan of action. Some action plans can even be magical, as in IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE,

where Heaven, at the suggestion of Clarence, grants George Bailey his wish that he'd never been born. And it works too!

GEORGE: ***Why am I seeing all these strange things?***
CLARENCE: Don't you understand, George? It's because you were never born.'
GEORGE BAILEY: 'Well, if I was never born... who am I?'
CLARENCE: 'You're nobody. You have no identity.'
GEORGE BAILEY: 'What do you mean no identity? My name is George Bailey!'
CLARENCE: 'There is no George Bailey.'
IT'S WONDERFUL LIFE



"'I wrote a lot of my plays drunk. It liberated me."
Simon Gray

Stories and Dramas with No Action

The playwright Simon Gray always acknowledged that his plays and dramas don't necessarily contain 'action' in the traditional sense. For example, Simon Grays's play THE OLD MASTERS has a first act with little if any discernible action. It does, however, have a situation and a fascinating character. It is set in Italy during the rise of Mussolini where the art critic, Bernard Berenson, finds himself

anxious about the state of his finances. A visitor representing a man called Duveen calls to ask Berenson to reconsider his attribution of a painting, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, from Titian to Giorgione, thereby increasing its value considerably. Berenson says no. That's sort of it. Later Duveen himself arrives, unannounced, to convince Berenson to change his mind in person. There then follows a long intense discussion about the nature of the relationship between the two men. Then the play ends.

Does it matter that Simon Gray's plays are not like those of David Mamet, where action is paramount? Perhaps not because what they do have at their centre is often a character study of a deeply flawed yet fascinating human being. These men are usually of the higher middle class. They are always witty and clever, but ultimately self-destructive and self-loathing. Many have seen these portraits as essentially versions of Gray himself. And Simon Gray's friends, including the novelist David Lodge, have acknowledged this. The conversations in the plays are engaging, funny and often fascinating. Yet they lack what has been called the 'spoken action'. All that said, the plays have a certain appeal, and, in their time, proved popular and commercially successful.

Z-CARS was a British television police series centred on the work of mobile uniformed police in the fictional northern town of Newtown. It was produced by the BBC and ran from 1962 to 1978. It's mentioned here because there was one entire episode where

nothing happened. The real police pointed out to the programme's creators that often mobile police officers would spend much of their night on duty just sitting in cars waiting for something to take place. But often nothing did. The writers took up the challenge and came up with an episode where the duty officers just sat in their patrol cars talking. It's not quite right to say that there was no action as each scene has its own dramatic dynamic. However, inaction, at least in police terms of night duty, was its focus.

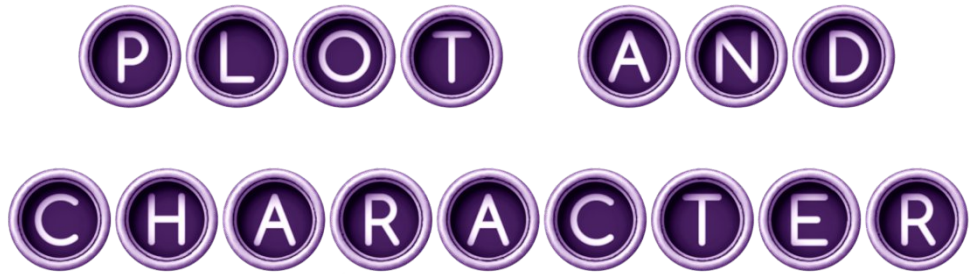


Terence Davies films rarely contain action in a traditional sense. Take THE LONG DAY CLOSES. It's a fascinating and beautiful looking movie which captures the final days of childhood of a boy who loves the movies. Essentially it's a character study of Terence Davies himself. But there's no real antagonist, or crisis moment, or climax. A boy simply asks his mother if he can have sixpence to go to the pictures, so she gives him the sixpence and he goes. The film itself mixes the boy's real life experiences with the fictional images on the screen, and stunning it all is, but there's no narrative as such. Is this a bad thing? No. What would be a bad thing would be to deny a great

filmmaker such as Davies the opportunity to present his picture just because it doesn't have action or even much of a story. And, of course, many novels are primarily meditations around character and character exploration. Slice of life drama.

"In those days they had time for everything."
From the soundtrack of Orson Welles' THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS (1942) and used in THE LONG DAY CLOSES written and directed by Terence Davies





The Essentials of Plot – Crisis

Nadir, ***noun, 1. the lowest or most unsuccessful point in a situation. 2. ASTRONOMY The point on the celestial sphere directly below an observer. Origin: From Arabic naẓīr (as-samt) 'opposite (to the zenith)'.***
Merriam-Webster Dictionary

The Crisis *Nadir*

The English poet John Donne is first on record as having used *nadir,* originally an astronomical term, in the figurative sense of the 'lowest point' and this he did in a sermon he wrote in 1627. The crisis *nadir* is in story terms the lowest point for the hero or put another way it's the either the moment of maximum jeopardy or maximum remove from the goal – or both together. Phrases associated with the crisis include 'the moment of truth', 'the end of the line', 'the darkest hour of the soul', 'all hope seems lost', 'the supreme ordeal', 'it's now of never' and 'the last chance saloon'. In the Western genre it's that cliché moment where 'a man's got to do what a man's got to

do.' In a mythological theory, the crisis is the 'Supreme Ordeal' or 'Visit to Death'. In PRINCESS BRIDE, for example, there is even a place called 'The Pit of Despair', which suggests perhaps that the screenwriter knew a bit about story theory. Well he did, because it was of course William Goldman.



The crisis (or 'The Hour of Despair' as some people call it) usually involves facing up to your greatest fear, your maximum dread, confronting your demons and being prepared to discover who you truly are as a human being. Dig deep and find the real you inside, for great men are, as they say, forged in fire.

But the dynamics of the crisis needn't be some sort of high noon confrontation nor even a cliff-edge battle. For example, take the movie BILLY ELLIOT. On the day of his audition, Billy gets into a fight and has a crisis of self-confidence. A boy from his background getting into the Royal Ballet suddenly seems a crazy idea. He is even reluctant to dance at all. He goes through with it but there's anger on his face. Billy certainly impresses the panel but it isn't quite enough. And then comes that moment when one of the interviewers asks

Billy, “What does it feel like when you’re dancing?” Billy Elliot just shrugs his shoulders and says, “Dunno”. The face of the interviewer is one of great disappointment. Here is a boy born to dance and he says “Dunno”. That is his true crisis moment. It is his maximum remove from his goal.

But then comes triumph – the climax. For then Billy says this:

> “Sorta feels good. Sorta stiff and that, but once I get going… then I like, forget everything. And… sorta disappear. Sorta disappear. Like I feel a change in my whole body. And I’ve got this fire in my body. I’m just there. Flyin’ like a bird. Like electricity. Yeah, like electricity.”

Forget about the fight or the letter confirming Billy’s place at the Ballet School, ‘Dunno’ is the Crisis and ‘like electricity’ is the true emotional climax, for the reaction and glance between the interviewers tell you that they have witnessed something truly unique. Simple words and glances, but with a power to move and, given the inspiration BILLY ELLIOT has offered young people, change lives. It’s beautiful storytelling and illustrates as well the often symbiotic relationship between crisis and climax.

“Never let a serious crisis go to waste. And what I mean by that is it’s an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before.”
Rahm Emanuel, American politician and diplomat



"Life is a constant oscillation between the sharp horns of dilemmas."
H. L. Mencken

The Crisis Dilemma

The crisis can often involve some sort of dilemma. And the options are never easy – for it's always either a choice between two irreconcilable goods or the lesser of two great evils.



Often the dilemma is built into the story as a result of the protagonist's original wants as opposed to the need they discover within themselves as a result of their journey. The protagonist usually starts out in the story with some sort of initial want but as the story progresses that want changes. Robert McKee talks about 'conscious' and 'unconscious wants', whereas other story theorists

talk about the original want and the realised need or outer want and inner need. However you wish to describe these wants/needs, the plot is so constructed that the dilemma has to be a tough choice between two incompatible actions.

Take as one example the PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO. The choice for Cecilia is between living in the perfect fictional world of the Hollywood escapist movie or returning to the deeply flawed but real flesh and blood world of her former life. Or A STAR IS BORN where the choice for the fading start is to live and see the new talent never fulfil their potential or die in the belief that new shining talent will go on to great heights.

The choice in HIGH NOON for Marshal Will Kane (Gary Cooper) is to do his duty and stay and fight or to leave with his wife and die a coward. As his wife Amy says, “If you won’t go with me now, I’ll be on the train when it leaves here.” And there’s something else here too and that is his wife’s non-violent Quaker principles. But there’s a twist when Amy herself is faced with a choice: watch her husband die or kill a man. The song *High Noon (Do Not Forsake Me),* sung by Tex Ritter with music and lyrics by songwriters Dimitri Tiomkin and Ned Washington, in fact foreshadows the whole plot:

> 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 twixt love and duty
S'posin', I lose my fair haired beauty
Look at that big hand move along
Nearin', high noon

In FIELD OF DREAMS, the choice for Ray Kinsella is lose everything or sell the farm. Except selling the farm is a false option, as the financial consortium offered by Ray's brother-in-law will come in anyway and dig up the baseball field. Only then Ray's daughter Karin says, "People will come." But there's a twist, for Karin begins to choke on a hotdog and this leads to a second crisis dilemma in the action of another character, namely 'Doc' Graham. 'Doc' can play ball on the field and fulfil his dream or walk over the boundary and save the life of the choking child. Perhaps here there is no choice but to save the child. Still, Shoeless Joe says to the young 'Doc', "Rookie, you were good" and maybe that's enough. By now the brother-in-law can see the players in the baseball field and insists it must never be sold. As it happened, in the dénouement people do come, for the film ends with an aerial helicopter shot revealing a long line of cars on their way to the field.



A word here about the phrase 'Hobson's choice'. It is said to have originated in the mid seventeenth century after a man named Thomas Hobson (1554–1631), a Cambridge carrier who hired out horses, who gave his customers the 'choice' of the horse nearest the door or none at all. The phrase later became the title for the play HOBSON'S CHOICE by Harold Brighouse, where, in the end, the cobbler Hobson is given the choice of losing his shop to the bailiffs or losing his shop to his son-in-law who he has little time for. Not quite no choice at all but given the character of Hobson pretty close. The first production was at the Princess Theatre in New York on November 2, 1915 and it remains very popular today, partly because, perhaps, it has a sense of the familiar in that it could be said to be a *Cinderella* story with strong undercurrents of KING LEAR.

"Fiction should be about moral dilemmas that are so bloody difficult that the author doesn't know the answer."
Pat Barker



"With right hand above the left, each fist clenched except for the pointing, hornlike index and little fingers, Weaver cast his whammy spell on Joe Gordon, the Yankee runner on second base."
From THE GASHOUSE GANG, 1945, by J. Roy Stockton

Crisis – The Double Whammy

The victim of the crime becoming the accused of the crime. The outcast finding themselves an outcast among outcasts. Whatever the problem the hero faces, the golden rule in Story is that at the moment of crisis, the problem should, if possible, be doubled. For example, Neil, the young student in DEAD POET'S SOCIETY, is not only told he cannot be an actor which is his dream but worse that he will be forced to go to medical school against his will. What is bad is made worse. The double whammy, the double blow. So always think what is it that can make bad worse. Maybe you're writing a drama about a failing comic. If so, don't just have him dying the death in front of an audience, have him dying the death with his peers watching. For that is the worst of the worst for any comedian.

"With right hand above the left, each fist clenched except for the pointing, hornlike index and little fingers, Weaver cast his whammy spell on Joe Gordon, the Yankee runner on second base." (From The Gashouse Gang, 1945, by J. Roy StocktonOne of the many things

about grief that isn't talked about enough is 'the double whammy'. How you feel two griefs and not none. There's your own grief. Missing them in your life. But the grief you feel 'for them' – for everything they are missing and will miss – can be just as tough."
Jess Denham



Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword."
Oscar Wilde, playwright and author

Crisis – 'Killing the One You Love'

A particularly strong crisis of self is the realisation that you have brought about the death of the one you love. That's the case in THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION. A popular new prison inmate, Tommy Williams, holds the key to Andy's innocence and Andy requests that Warden Norton listen to the man's testimony as it would surely lead to Andy's unjust imprisonment being overturned. But the Warden knows that if Andy were ever to be free it would mean the end of his crooked prison regime. The Warden cannot take that risk and so ultimately the young inmate and close friend of Andy is shot by

corrupt prison guards. And Andy himself is left for many weeks in the dark, in empty solitary confinement in the realisation that it was his actions that led, albeit indirectly, to the death of Tommy Williams.



The movie STAGE DOOR has a very different setting. Not an all male prison but an all female theatrical guesthouse. A new arrival, a wealthy but unworldly young actress called Miss Terry Randall (Katherine Hepburn) befriends Kaye Hamilton (Andre Leeds) who, though a fine actress with rave reviews, is finding life in the theatre a struggle. Kaye hardly has enough money to pay for her food and lodgings. Without realising it, Miss Randall takes the part in a new production that would have been perfect for Kaye. Already at a low point in her life, the loss is too much for Kaye and her mind begins to lose a sense of reality which results in her death. Miss Randall is then told that the part she took from Kaye, mainly due to her wealthy father's influence, was what led to Kaye's suicide. And so now Miss Randall faces her own despair.

But both Andy Dufresne and Terry Randall go on, survive and make it through their respective crises. THE SHAWSHANK

REDEMPTION the viewer has been misdirected to believe that Andy has, after his release from solitary confinement, taken his own life, especially when there is no reply from his cell the next morning. Yet when the prison guards enter the cell they find it empty. Andy has escaped. In STAGE DOOR, the realisation that Terry Randall has, without realising it, caused the death of her friend gives her an understanding of life and its tragedies that she has never had before. And Miss Randall goes on to give a great performance which she dedicates to her actress friend.

"That old saying, how you always kill the one you love, well, look, it works both ways."
FIGHT CLUB by Chuck Palahniuk



"We may stumble and fall but shall rise again; it should be enough if we did not run away from the battle."
Mahatma Gandhi, peace campaigner

The Battle

The crisis also often includes a battle of some sort – in colloquial terms it's 'the final showdown' or 'the shoot-out'. In courtroom dramas this usually takes place on the witness stand, in

Westerns on a deserted street at high noon. That said, pretty much the majority of the movie THE DARKEST HOUR is the battle of Winston Churchill with his War Cabinet. Churchill's instincts are to fight on but his War Cabinet favour negotiation. Much of the movie then is in crisis mode. It's to the credit of both the writer and director that Churchill's *nadir* is sustained yet never becomes repetitive or monotonous.

"No battle plan survives contact with the enemy."
Colin Powell



"And so every one of us shares the supreme ordeal – carries the cross of the redeemer– not in the bright moments of his tribe's great victories, but in the silences of his personal despair."
Joseph Campbell, THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES

The Supreme Ordeal

The mythological way of seeing crisis is as the 'Supreme Ordeal', an idea that originates from Joseph Campbell but was popularised by Christopher Vogler. A key aspect of this concept is the metaphorical 'Death' of the hero, for the hero must die in order to be reborn as their new self. Taste death, as the Bible says (*Hebrews* 2:9: "We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now

crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone").

In fact, in many a story the hero is assumed to be dead – think of Harry Potter carried in the arms of Hagrid – only to then suddenly come alive again, or rather reveal they were never dead in the first place. Once the hero is 'Resurrected' they often seem to possess a certain invulnerability, as exemplified by the hero of FOR A FEW DOLLARS MORE, who seems immune to bullets hitting him. But it is, of course, just a metal plate hidden underneath his poncho, a trick Marty borrowed in the final BACK TO THE FUTURE movie.

Another key concept in Campbell's mythological theory is that the hero must absorb the power of his adversary or shadow/antagonist. Sometimes this character is even their former mentor. In Freudian terms you must kill your father to becomes a man (literally exemplified in STAR WARS, but only metaphorically so in RED RIVER). And similar mother-daughter dynamics can be found in GYPSY and, to some degree, in NOW, VOYAGER. However it is expressed, the idea is that hero takes on the power of the shadow.

"I say, follow your bliss and don't be afraid, and doors will open where you didn't know they were going to be."
Joseph Campbell



"The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis."
Dante Alighieri

Ignoring the Crisis

There is, of course, always the option of not facing up to the crisis and simply running away or ignoring it. There is, for example, the very passive protagonist of FIVE EASY PIECES, Robert "Bobby" Eroica Dupea (Jack Nicholson) who, when faced with any difficulty, does run away. At his moment of crisis he simply climbs through a toilet window to escape. FIVE EASY PIECES takes its title from a piano exam that the protagonist once had to take. He chose the easiest option then and he does it again now.

But running away is not always a bad idea. In THE SOUND OF MUSIC Captain von Trapp has the crisis dilemma of either fighting for or refusing to fight for the Nazis. Neither is an option. The only option then for the von Trapps is to give up their home and escape Austria. Yes, it's running away, but here it is the only possible way out.

However, there are times when an impossible choice leads to the ending of one's own life. In DEAD POETS SOCIETY, Neil is told by his father that he will not be allowed to follow his dream of

becoming an actor and instead he will be forced to go to medical school, which he knows he will hate. But in a way it's more than that. It's about a cold and controlling father who does not and never will understand his son. That is the true crisis Neil is faced with. And as a result he takes his own life.

"Adversity is the first step to truth."
Lord Byron, English writer and poet



"The power we discover inside ourselves as we survive a life-threatening experience can be utilised equally well outside of crisis, too. I am, in every moment, capable of mustering the strength to survive again – or of tapping that strength in other good, productive, healthy ways."
Michele Rosenthal

Placement of the Crisis Moment

The crisis is when there is no other option. In terms of narrative placement, the crisis leads to the final major turning point of the plot in that what follows is climax. The crisis in colloquial terms is where we've 'reached the end of the line' and where we must 'face up to our demons'.



The great advantage, of course, of placing the crisis immediately before the climax is that, in certain stories, you get the greatest dynamic leap from your lowest point – your nadir – to your highest point – your zenith – which is the moment when your goal is achieved. And that's certainly the case in THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION where there is an unexpected release from a seemingly inescapable predicament.

Bond villains have a habit of sadistically prolonging the crisis moment with gory details of how 007 is to be killed. Not only that, they insist as well on telling Bond, since he's powerless and about to be castrated by a lazar or eaten by sharks or whatever, the intricate details of their action plan. And all this is cleverly parodied in TEAM AMERICA: WORLD POLICE:

> KIM: No Prince Charming rode in on a white stallion to save the day. This is the real world. I'm afraid your world is OVER! In five minutes. Yeesss, the ticking clock!! … Right now, famiries are gathering in parks. Children are walking to school. Friends are sitting in movie theatres, all compretery unaware that the world is about to change forever. All because of me…

"Maybe it did take a crisis to get to know yourself; maybe you needed to get whacked hard by life before you understood what you wanted out of it."
Jodi Picoult



"Great occasions do not make heroes or cowards; they simply unveil them to our eyes. Silently and imperceptibly, as we wake or sleep, we grow strong or weak; and at last some crisis shows what we have become."
Brooke Foss Westcott

From Crisis to Climax

But sometimes the crisis is only an apparent defeat, for the protagonist will often dig down and find in themselves a will and a power they never knew they had. And that will lead to a climax where they win in the end.

Not that all writers believe this. Some even consider it to be a pernicious lie, for, they argue, most human beings are not made like that. This 'dig-deep-and-find-the-real-you' is not, for instance, a

moment you will ever find in a David Mamet play. Well, even if it is a lie, it's still a Story moment many people want to believe in.

"You are never stronger...than when you land on the other side of despair."
Zadie Smith, novelist



Here are some thoughts on the nature of Crisis…

"When written in Chinese, the word crisis is composed of two characters – one represents danger, and the other represents opportunity."
John F. Kennedy

"In prehistoric times, mankind often had only two choices in crisis situations: fight or flee. In modern times, humour offers us a third alternative; fight, flee – or laugh."
Robert Orben, American comedy writer

"Persons in whom a crisis takes place pass the night preceding the paroxysm uncomfortably, but the succeeding night generally more comfortably."
Hippocrates, ancient Greek philosopher

"Faced with crisis, the man of character falls back on himself. He imposes his own stamp of action, takes responsibility for it, makes it his own."

Charles de Gaulle, former French President

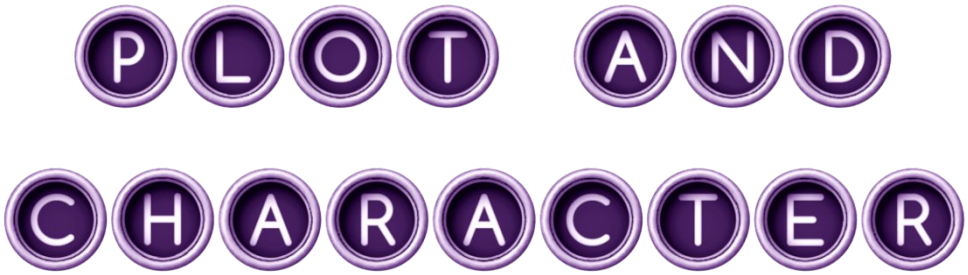
"Sometimes you need a little crisis to get your adrenaline flowing and help you realize your potential."

Jeannette Walls

"When faced with a radical crisis, when the old way of being in the world, of interacting with each other and with the realm of nature doesn't work anymore, when survival is threatened by seemingly insurmountable problems, an individual life-form – or a species – will either die or become extinct or rise above the limitations of its condition through an evolutionary leap."

Eckhart Tolle





The Essentials of Plot – Climax

"After the climax no change is possible. The climax, however, is not identical with the goal. The climax decided the defeat of one side, after which the victorious side may proceed to attain the goal, which may be attained instantly or at some later date"
Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

Climax

When we talk of 'climax' in story terms what we are referring to is the 'top of the story' rather than the closing credits or final page. The word climax comes from the Greek *klimax*, meaning 'ladder, and the sense of climax as a culmination (or 'top of the ladder') arose in the late eighteenth-century. Colloquially phrases and words associated with the climax include the 'end of'. In Aristotelian terms the climax is the end of the story in the sense that no further action can follow, but again, it should be stressed that this is not the same as the final curtain or when the play finishes, but rather the conclusion of the central dramatic action.

The climax in a story is the final turning point and usually comes as a direct result of the crisis decision and is an immediate consequence of it. The climax reverses the previous crisis state – be it physical, moral or emotional or a seemingly inescapable predicament – and the change that comes with it is absolute and irreversible. What is key is that now all suspense comes to an end, for there is no longer any doubt as to the outcome.



The climax connects directly to the Inciting Incident (the trigger for action), and, if there has been a disequilibrium, then the equilibrium is put back to what it was or, and this is more often the case, a new equilibrium is created. In the mythological way of seeing story, if the crisis faced was death-like then the climax is often portrayed and presented as a kind of rebirth or apotheosis. That said, the story dynamics of climax can be big or small, spoken or gestured.

For the protagonist, the goal is either achieved or it not achieved. If the goal is achieved it will probably be done in an unexpected way, and if it isn't achieved, it will likely be because along the journey the protagonist came to some sort of realisation

that what they truly wanted was a different outcome entirely. Anyway, whatever the conclusion, the point is that the new situation that is achieved is not reversible.

But what if it's not clear what the conclusion will be? What if the climax to story is not presented or the n what has happened or does it allow more action to follow or it simply stops? Essentially what we have been looking at so far is the concept of the 'closed ending', but there are others including the open ending and the anti-climax. There can be as valid in their own way depending on the type of story you wish to tell and the nature of your philosophy of life.

"The climax is the stage at which the protagonist finds release from their seemingly inescapable predicament."
John Yorke, INTO THE WOODS

"The wise man does not expose himself needlessly to danger, since there are few things for which he cares sufficiently; but he is willing, in great crises, to give even his life – knowing that under certain conditions it is not worthwhile to live."
Aristotle

"All tragedies are finished by a death; or comedy by a marriage."
Lord Byron

"All the frustrations of all the little narratives in your life that never had a real climax can be present in the rare dénouement that life also offers once in a great while."
Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART



“And now the end is here
And so I face the final curtain…”
***My Way,* by songwriters: Paul Anka, Gilles Thibaut, Claude Francois and Jacques Revaux**

‘An End’ – According to Aristotle

For Aristotle ‘the end’ is the converse of the beginning in that the end is that which follows from something else but which has nothing else to follow after it, whereas the beginning is that which has nothing that precedes it. Ideally, for Aristotle a tragedy should be not just a drama that is the imitation of a complete action, but also one where the events presented on the stage evoke fear and pity. This, he argues, comes about when events for a good but imperfect character go from the expected good fortune to unexpected fortune. But key here is that although these events occur contrary to expectation, nevertheless, they happen because of what came previously. Yes, they are unexpected, but still logical, credible and casual. A sense, if you will, that it was always going to end like this. Not surprising perhaps, as the Greeks had a great sense of fate and destiny.

Aristotle, it should be said, made a distinction between what he called complex plot (one that involved that unexpected reversal and

discovery) and the simple plot (one where there is no unexpected reversal or discovery, but instead a gradation of change).

"'Once there was a farmer who wanted to sell his pig.' How do I know when I'm finished? When the pig's sold, or when the farmer discovers that he cannot sell the pig – when the end of that syllogism has come to pass."
David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM



"Give the reader what they want, just not the way they expect it."
William Goldman

Unexpected but Inevitable

William Goldman's maxim that you should give the reader or audience what they want but not in the way they expect it runs through all story theory. It is a variation on the idea that the climax of the story should be unexpected but inevitable. Both maxims in fact can be found in the climax of THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION. The climax is the escape of Andy, but no one could have been expecting the way he did it, yet his of method escape was there in plain sight all through the tale. And when we consider all the years

that went before, and all the preparation that Andy did quietly by himself, then his escape was indeed inevitable.



Another unexpected moment can be found in TOY STORY. Buzz Lightyear and Woody need a flame of some sort to light the fuse to launch them into the air. Well, for much of the story there has been a match. Woody lights it up… and then it gets blown out. Oh no! We didn't expect that! But then Woody feels the heat coming through Buzz's glass helmet and Woody remembers something. What he recalls is the unpleasant boy neighbour using a magnifying glass to burn his toys. Bulbous glass angled carefully in line with the sun can produce heat big enough to burn. And guess what, Buzz has a round glass helmet! Inevitable, really, when you see it in that way.

"To infinity, and beyond!"
Buzz Lightyear



'Oh, I get by with a little help from my friends
Mm, gonna try with a little help from my friends
Oh, I get high with a little help from my friends
Yes, I get by with a little help from my friends
With a little help from my friends.'
***With a Little Help from My Friends,* by songwriters John Lennon and Paul McCartney**

With a Little Help from Friends

Most modern stories have a lone protagonist who draws on their inner strength following the moment of crisis that leads to the climax. However, in the fairy tale tradition the climactic action often involves not only that which has been collected or given by others along the journey, but also allies that have been encountered, especially animals. The wedding in LITTLE MERMAID, for example, is disrupted and delayed by animal interference. But this concept need not be restricted to fairy tales. In NOTTING HILL, when Will (Hugh Grant) realises he loves Anna (Julia Roberts) after all, Will's friends help him get across the busy London streets to her press conference. One leaps out of the car to stop traffic and another uses her wheelchair disability to get the passed the snooty hotel receptionist at The Savoy Hotel. Will is still the protagonist but he's no Sam Spade

or James Bond and so gets what he needs, as the song goes, ‘with a little help from my friends’.

ANNA SCOTT: Can I stay for a while?
WILLIAM: You can stay forever.
From NOTTING HILL, directed by Roger Michell and written by Richard Curtis



“This is the end of a story that even people who are not usually amazed at anything may refuse to believe. But I am armed in advance against human incredulity.”
Jules Verne
JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH

Dynamics

As said, the dynamics of a climax can be big or small, or indeed noisy or silent. The traditional action movie tends to be both big and noisy, as the ‘climactic action’ is often extended and literally explosive, for example in as in INDEPENDENCE DAY and STAR WARS. Westerns, of course, tend to have a shootout, as in HIGH NOON and ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST. Some shoots result in mutual killings. Think ENEMY OF THE STATE, LOCK STOCK AND TWO SMOKING BARRELS, THE KILLING and FISTFUL OF DOLLARS. And in its

own way you might add Agatha Christie's AND THEN THERE WERE NONE.

The spreading of the climactic action in DR STRANGELOVE is arguable about as big as you can ever get in that nuclear bombs start going off pretty much everywhere. During the Cold War the nuclear policy was in fact known as M.A.D. – meaning Mutually Assured Destruction. And that certainly is what happens in DR STRANGELOVE, subtitled HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE BOMB.



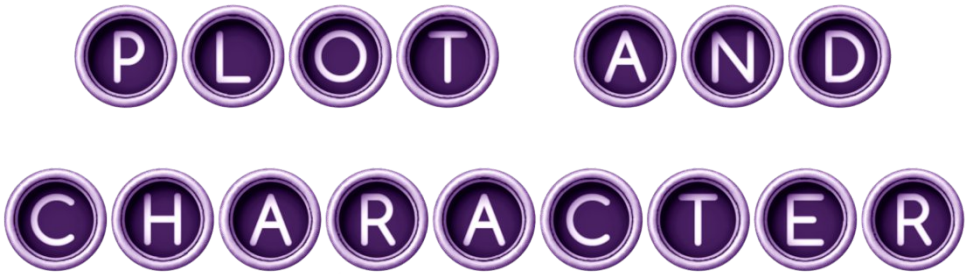
But not all climactic moments are necessarily ear-splitting, blinding or vapourising. In 12 ANGRY MEN, the climax comes when

the most resistant Juror 3 (Lee J. Cobb) quietly says “Not guilty”. As soon as he says this, the jury have the unanimous twelve needed to acquit. In Ibsen’s THE DOLL’S HOUSE, the climax is a door shutting off stage, and, similarly, in the movie ORDINARY PEOPLE the climax moment is when one of the characters simply gets up and leaves.

HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER is interesting because in some way the climax of the action is simply handing over the sub to the Americans. Not really that much of a climax for a thriller. However, there is a sub-plot, the rogue Russian submarine which suddenly appears and launches its torpedo.

“Everything has to end sometime, otherwise nothing would get ever get started.”
The Doctor in the *A Christmas Carol* episode of DOCTOR WHO written by Steven Moffat





The Essentials of Plot – Closed Endings, Open Endings, Ambiguous Endings and Meta-fictional Endings

"Remember that all worlds draw to an end and that noble death is a treasure which no one is too poor to buy."
C. S. Lewis, THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: THE LAST BATTLE

The 'Closed Ending'

The 'closed ending', meaning that which is resolved, irreversible and absolute, is the default climax/ending for most stories. And audiences seem to prefer closed endings, partly because, on the whole, that is what they're familiar with, and partly because the clear and absolute ending does bring with it a certain type of psychological satisfaction. We're all familiar with that modern term 'closure' which is something that therapists in particular are keen to bring about in personal narratives involving trauma.

However, it could also be said that closed endings are both formulaic and unrealistic, for real life rarely offers us any sort of complete conclusion. But this whole question about our need or preference for a closed ending goes back to the function of Story itself, where some see the purpose of narrative as being one of the means by which we understand and cope with life. It may be that closed endings only exist in Story, but, in doing so, they offer us emotional, moral, social and spiritual ways to deal with the changes that we face in our own life journeys.

"We tell ourselves stories in order to make sense of life. Narrative is reassuring. There are days in life when life is so absurd, it's crippling – nothing makes sense, but stories bring order to the absurdity. Relief is provided by the narrative's beginning, middle, and end. Without an end, you have an obsession, a constant circling around a fact or situation that cannot be put in place."
Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART



"I always rip out the last page of a book. That way, it doesn't have to end. I hate endings."
The Doctor in *The Angels Take Manhattan* episode on DOCTOR WHO written by Steven Moffat

Open Ending

An opening ending is simply a Climax where there is no clear, irreversible or absolute conclusion to the action. Nowadays they are a regular feature of plays, novels and movies. It's difficult to see how films such as THE ITALIAN JOB, THE BIRDS, AMERICAN PSYCHO, THE THING (the 1982 version) or MANHATTAN could be improved upon with a clearer outcome. Likewise, the stage dramas PRIVATE LIVES, OUR TOWN, WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF, WAITING FOR GODOT. And you might add here Laurence Sterne's late-eighteenth century novel TRISTRAM SHANDY, which ends in chronological terms before it even begins.



The advantage of an open ending is that the audience is left to make up their own minds as to what happens next. Perhaps as well, as the reader is left to fill in the blanks, they may ask what they would they have done in their own life in a similar situation. And an unresolved ending is also arguably more realistic, as life's issues are often messy, ragged and rarely if ever come with an absolute or irreversible conclusion. All that said, open endings can sometimes

confuse and annoy an audience or reader, and leave them with the sense that the writer hasn't done their job properly. And as a result the reader can feel betrayed and frustrated.

Some thoughts on (and examples of) open endings…

"Sometimes you can tease, as with the ending of GAMEPLAN. Indeed, this was a particularly interesting stopping point. I felt secretly that the characters were not going to get what they wanted and that the end result would be rather downbeat. On other hand, I felt that the audience, because of what had gone before, would in this case really prefer a happy ending. Solution: to stop before the true ending is revealed, leaving everyone to supply their own."

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?
Estragon: Yes, let's go.
[THEY DO NOT MOVE.]
CURTAIN

The last lines and stage direction of WAITING FOR GODOT by Samuel Beckett

"A picture should end as it has to. I don't think anything in life ends 'right'."

Carol Reed

"THE HANDMAID'S TALE is an example of an open end. So reader's choice. Does she get any further away than Bangor, Maine, or not? Does she manage to escape over the border to Canada, or not? Does she make it as far as England, or not? We don't know, and people have been after me for thirty-three years to tell them, and I have not been able to tell them, because it is one of those instances

where we just don't know. People want things to be tidy, it drives them crazy when they're not, which is I think why there are policemen dedicated to solving cold cases. It just drives them crazy that they have not got the answer."
Margaret Atwood

CHARLIE CROKER (Michael Caine): Hang on a minute lads, I've got a great idea.
The last line of THE ITALIAN JOB, directed by Peter Collinson, with screenplay by Troy Kennedy-Martin



"Revenge is sweet and not fattening."
Alfred Hitchcock

The 'Retribution Clause'

For Miss Prism in Oscar Wilde's THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST the good end happy, the bad unhappy – "that is what fiction means." Up to a point, Aristotle would have agreed with her. Neither a good man meeting ill-fortune nor a wicked man benefiting from good fortune can be right, was his thesis. More recently, or at least in the last hundred years or so, there was the Hays Code (1930) which stated that 'No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing,

evil or sin.' Alfred Hitchcock, who made most of his movies under the strictures of the Hays Code, often talked about the 'retribution clause'. That sense of poetic justice being done and the bad guy getting their just deserts. And in his television series ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENT, even if in the story the wrong-doer seems to have got away with it, it his coda Hitchcock always tells the viewer that the miscreant was in fact later caught and punished. Even today it's rare, except in horror and 'Slasher' movies, that the bad guy wins.

"Who says life is fair, where is that written?"
William Goldman THE PRINCESS BRIDE



"I'm positive about the negative, little negative about the positive."
Curly Howard

Positive/Negative

Life of course can be both good and bad at the same time. And this is reflected in many contemporary endings in both novels and movies. THE GOOD SHEPHERD by John Grisham, for example, has a typical example of the modern trend for the positive/negative ending. The story centres on a court case against an insurance company. It's a David-and-Goliath tale where the battle is won

against the corporate giant – in fact the compensation and fine is set in the millions of dollars – but then the insurance company files for bankruptcy and so those who lost loved ones don't get a dime. Ironically, had they settled early, they would have been guaranteed far more money. Yet perhaps in this case the moral victory is enough.

A positive/negative ending of a different kind can be found in THE GODFATHER: PART TWO which, unusually, offers two narratives in parallel. One storyline of the movie has Veto Corleone establishing his own mafia family and his own personal family, whilst the other features his son, Michael, who is only a baby in the first narrative, maintaining his mafia family, yet essentially destroying the familial one. And it's through editing and the constant juxtaposing of the two narratives that the director Francis Coppula points out the contrasts between the lives of the two protagonists.

More thoughts on positives and negatives…

"Everything has positive and negative consequences."
Farrah Fawcett, actress

"Positive anything is better than negative nothing."
Elbert Hubbard

"Remember, a negative multiplied by a negative is only positive in maths, not in the real world."
Eric Thomas



"To learn which questions are unanswerable, and not to answer them: this skill is most needful in times of stress and darkness."
Ursula K. Le Guin, THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS

Ambiguous Endings

Sometimes the climax is left ambiguous. But an ambiguous ending is not quite the same as an open ending. A good example of this is ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA – was it all just a drug induced dream? The same question could be asked of David Lynch's MULHOLLAND DRIVE and WILD AT HEART. '*It turned out to be all a dream*' is now a hackneyed story trope but Lynch, to be fair, is the master of the surrealist noir and in his movies nothing is ever quite what it seems.



There is no 'It was all a dream' ending in the 1938 movie ANGELS WITH DIRTY FACES. They didn't do that sort of thing then.

However, the ending is ambiguous. The story of ANGELS WITH DIRTY FACES concerns two delinquent boys, where one grows up in the penal system and becomes a gangster, while the other just escapes police capture and in his life path becomes a priest determined to help keep the young on the right side of the law. The gangster, Rocky Sullivan, now facing the electric chair for his crimes, has become hero to a gang of young boys, The Dead End Kids, who the gangster's friend the priest, Jerry Connolly, has taken under his wing. The boys want the gangster to go to the electric chair proud, with his head held high, but the priest begs his friend not to become a hero to these boys. In the climax that follows the gangster certainly begins with his head held high, but then turns 'yellow', begging for his life. But is this all just an act? Did Rocky in fact do this for his friend Father Connolly who is there watching and praying? Did Rocky only pretend to be yellow in a moment of redemption and in the hope that he does not become a hero to the young boys? And if this is the case, then wasn't that a brave thing to do in its own way? In the resolution that follows, there is a scene where the boys show their loss of faith in their hero gangster and turn more to the priest. As for Father Connolly, if he knows the truth he keeps to himself.

ANGELS WITH DIRTY FACES (1938) was directed by Michael Curtiz for Warner Brothers, with a screenplay written by John Wexley and Warren Duff based on the story by Rowland Brown.

Some more thoughts on ambiguity and doubt…

"On the road from the City of Skepticism, I had to pass through the Valley of Ambiguity."
Adam Smith

"I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next.
Delicious Ambiguity."
Gilda Radner, American actress and comedian

"To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; so to say it is ambiguous is to assert that it's meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won… it is because man's condition is ambiguous that he seeks, through failure and outrageousness, to save his existence."
Simone de Beauvoir, THE ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY

"Isn't life a collection of weird quizzes with no answers to half the questions?"
Pawan Mishra

"Ambiguity is the devil's volleyball."
Emo Philips, comedian



"Hope is a good breakfast but a poor supper."
Popular Proverb

False Endings

The movies BRAZIL and WILD AT HEART both have what could be called false endings. Each seem to have a happy ending, only then it is suggested that what you have been witnessing is only a fantasy or a dream. And NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET seems to repeat this trick *ad infinitum*. You might also include here INCEPTION, with its spinning top that may or may not be about to topple over…

"'Harsh reality is always better than false hope.'"
Dr Clarkson in DOWNTON ABBEY written by Julian Fellowes

"Too many false endings irritate audiences. They get it in their minds that it is just wrapping up and then it isn't. This can kill you."
Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES



"I don't think there's any director that finishes a movie and says, 'Wow that's perfect, that's what I really want it to be. Every movie I've ever made I wish I could go and grab some additional stuff and that's exactly the chance I got this time. It's like getting a new car but you get fancy rims and a new stereo."
David Aye, director of SUICIDE SQUAD

Reshoots and Your Chose of Endings

Sometimes in the movie industry two endings are shot and preview audiences are presented with both and asked to fill in a form as to which they would choose. This happened with THE MALTA STORY and occasionally it is the preview print with both endings asking its audience to decide which they prefer that is occasionally shown on television. In Hollywood, of course, movies are reshot on a regular basis. Two examples of this are FATAL ATTRACTION and THE CHAMP. The original ending of FATAL ATTRACTION (1987) ended with Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) essentially ending her own life. However, this did not work well with preview audiences and so the movie was reshot and replaced with a sequence where Alex was intent on revenge on the man she had had an affair with but who later rejected her. In the new climax it's the man's wife who shoots her. An older example is THE CHAMP (1931), which is a boxing movie about a man down on his luck and his son who nevertheless hero worships his father. The original ending had it that the boxer father lost his final bout then died. Preview audiences didn't like that. 'At least let him win the bout,' was the feedback. And this is what happened in the new ending. The movie is essentially a redemption story and this, and many like it in the Great Depression, went on to become a big commercial success. Other movies which were reshot following test audiences are MISERY, LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS, GET

OUT, E.T. THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL, THE SUICIDE SQUAD, THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION, and, notoriously, BLADE RUNNER.

THE PLAYER (1992), of course, famously satirises the reshoot, but don't think it's just Hollywood movies that have done this sort of thing. Many of Charles Dickens' novels were published in weekly or monthly instalments and so Dickens could gauge public reaction. GREAT EXPECTATIONS, for example, was first published as a serial in Dickens's weekly periodical *All the Year Round*, from 1 December 1860 to August 1861, and it was only in October 1861 that Chapman and Hall published the novel in three volumes. As for the ending, there were several. One ending (published by John Forster in LIFE OF CHARLES DICKENS after the author's death) has Pip encountering Estella, who tells of her abusive marriage to Bentley Drummle:

> It was four years more, before I saw herself. I had heard of her as leading a most unhappy life, and as being separated from her husband who had used her with great cruelty, and who had become quite renowned as a compound of pride, brutality, and meanness.
> I had heard of the death of her husband (from an accident consequent on ill-treating a horse), and of her being married again to a Shropshire doctor, who, against his interest, had once very manfully interposed, on an occasion when he was in professional attendance on Mr. Drummle, and had witnessed some outrageous treatment of her. I had heard that the Shropshire doctor was not rich, and that they lived on her own personal fortune.
> I was in England again – in London, and walking along Piccadilly with little Pip – when a servant came running after me to ask would I step back to a lady in a carriage who

> wished to speak to me. It was a little pony carriage, which the lady was driving; and the lady and I looked sadly enough on one another.
> "I am greatly changed, I know; but I thought you would like to shake hands with Estella, too, Pip. Lift up that pretty child and let me kiss it!" (She supposed the child, I think, to be my child.)
> I was very glad afterwards to have had the interview; for, in her face and in her voice, and in her touch, she gave me the assurance, that suffering had been stronger than Miss Havisham's teaching, and had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be.

This conclusion to the story is both sad and final, as it's clear from the encounter that although Estella has learned some compassion, there is no chance of reconciliation. Dickens showed this ending to his friend Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who considered it a bit downbeat. Dickens then created a new ending which is far more ambiguous, and that's the one which was published on August 3, 1861 with this now better known last scene:

> "But you said to me," returned Estella, very earnestly, "'God bless you, God forgive you!' And if you could say that to me then, you will not hesitate to say that to me now,--now, when suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but--I hope--into a better shape. Be as considerate and good to me as you were, and tell me we are friends."
> "We are friends," said I, rising and bending over her, as she rose from the bench.
> "And will continue friends apart," said Estella.

> I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her.

It's ambiguous and so a happy ending is not ruled out. That said, it doesn't quite fit the mood of the earlier chapters which all point to the downer ending.

"I see stories about movies having weeks of reshoots, and my first reaction is 'I wish we could afford weeks of reshoots for our movies.' Reshoots are a hugely useful part of the filmmaking process, and fear of reshoots has ruined plenty of potentially good indie movies. I think about seventy per cent of the movies I produced had reshoots, and the twenty-five per cent without reshoots would have had reshoots if budget and schedule allowed. One hundred per cent of the movies I've produced that had reshoots were improved by those reshoots. Feel free to ask the directors."

Keith Calder, producer of YOU'RE NEXT (2011), THE GUEST (2014) and ANOMALISA (2015)



"For Meta-fiction, in its ascendant and most important phases, was really nothing more than a single-order expansion of its own great theoretical nemisis, Realism: if realism called it like it saw it, Meta-fiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing itself see."

David Foster Wallace

Meta-fiction and Endings

In THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMAN you get three endings. After the first ending narrator appears as a character in the narrative and he then offers the protagonist a coin toss to decide which plausible ending he should tell next. Another ending where the narrator speaks directly to the protagonist can be found in Spike Milligan's PUCKOON, where the narrator pointed leaves the hero up a tree.

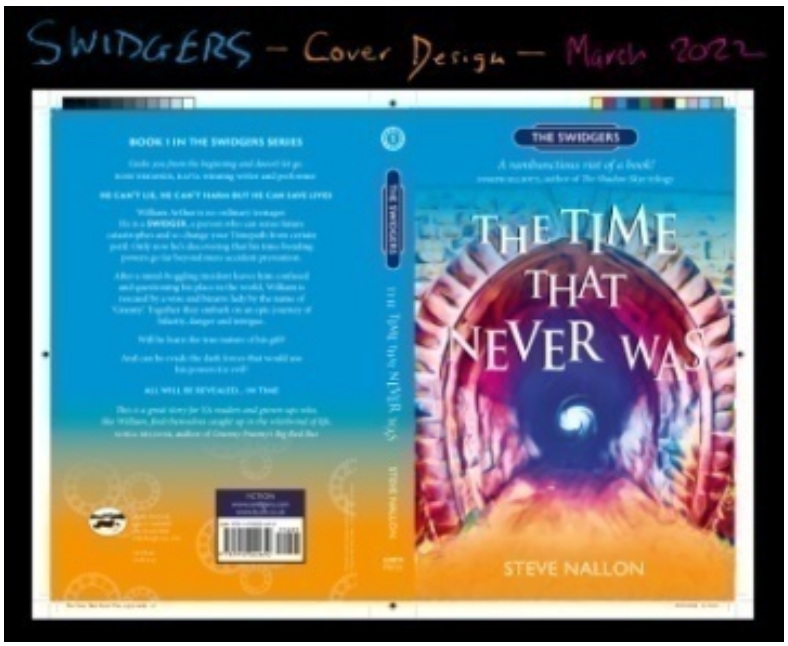


In MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL, which supposedly has a medieval setting, modern day police officers turn up and stop the filming of that movie, resulting in a black screen which thereby brings the said movie to its end. In F.W. Murnau's THE LAST LAUGH (1924), the ending seems to be a sad one in that we are left with the image of a pathetic old man wrapped in the cloak of the night watchman. Only then there appears on the screen a title-card, the first of the movie, which reads: "Here the story should really end, for, in real life, the forlorn old man would have little to look forward to but death. The author took pity on him and has provided a quite

improbable epilogue.” And that new ending is that the protagonist inherits a fortune, which ends in him treating all his friends to champagne and caviar. In fact, it’s this ending which inspired the English language title as opposed to the German original DER LETZTE MANN or ‘The Last Man’.



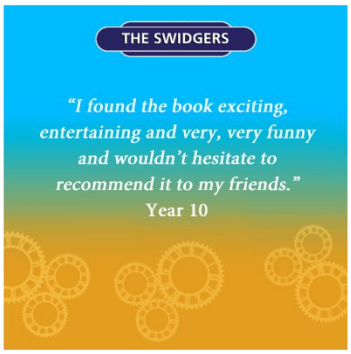
The point here is that each of these in their own way are examples of meta-fiction endings, meta-fiction being a form which emphasises its manner of construction in a way that continually reminds the audience or reader that they are viewing or reading a fictional work.



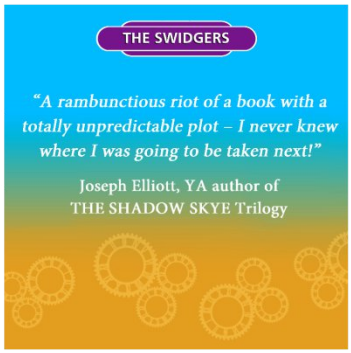
Another could be said to be THE PLAYER, the 1992 American satirical black comedy film directed by Robert Altman and written by Michael Tolkin, based on his 1988 novel of the same name. However, the meta-fiction in THE PLAYER is more subtle in that it is presented as story of a Hollywood film studio executive who kills an aspiring screenwriter he believes is sending him death threats. The plot of THE PLAYER involves a screenplay HABEAS CORPUS, which itself involves a murder plot. This screenplay is given the green and filmed,

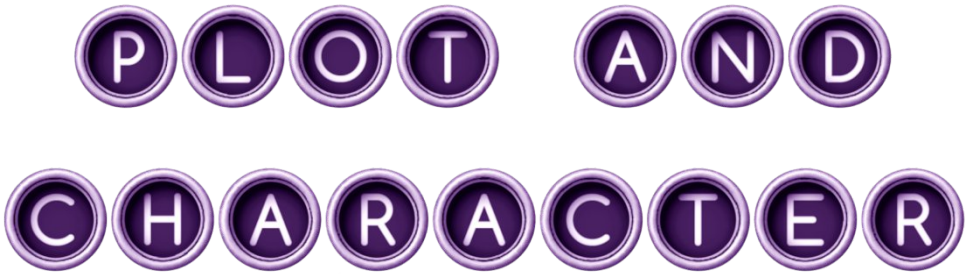
but it turns out to be so bad it's expected to flop. Only then the former movie executive comes in at the last moment and suggests changes to salvage the film's reputation, thus letting him reclaim his position at the studio. One year later, studio power players are watching the end of HABEAS CORPUS with a new, tacked-on, upbeat Hollywood ending that now has Bruce Willis saving Julia Roberts. Mill's plan to save the movie has worked and he's head of the studio.

"Real life is generally very haphazard in its plotting, and I think a lot of people lament that, and turn to fiction to briefly experience, albeit vicariously, a more satisfying sort of reality. We want to see 'sense' not necessarily happy endings, but effectual actions and significant outcomes. (Postmodern fiction and meta-fiction, I gather, aim to call attention to the falsity of these things, which is like selling liquor that perversely makes you more sober).
Tim Powers, American science fiction and fantasy author









The Essentials of Plot – Anti-climax and *Deus ex Machina*

"An anti-climax once in a while is good for my heart."
Doctor Who in the *Into the Dalek* episode from DOCTOR WHO

Anti-climax

The anti-climax comes in many forms. One is where the story simply stops at an apparently arbitrary point. This was the case with THE SOPRANOS and THE WIRE. Also you might add here the 1960s police drama SOFTLY, SOFTLY and several television plays of the period where the classic climax ending was resisted. The ending of the movie MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL reflected this trend and the movie was brought to a conclusion by modern police officers grabbing the camera with the result that the film stops and we, the audience, were left with a blank screen.

Another type of anti-climax is where the crisis decision, and ultimately the resulting climax, is taken out of the hands of the protagonist. BLADE RUNNER, for example, is in this category, for the

antagonist, Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), simply chooses to stop, albeit with a beautiful piece of poetic writing ("I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhauser gate. All those moments will be lost in time... like tears in rain... Time to die.") In this category of antagonist you could also include Caravaggio (Willem Dafoe), the revenging antagonist in THE ENGLISH PATIENT, who gives up on his quest, albeit for good dramatic reasons. But the point here is that there is not a traditional climax, which is not, of course, necessarily a bad thing.



Another type of anti-climax comes as a result of outside intervention. In JURASSIC PARK, for example, Tim and Lex are pursued by the raptors in a kitchen, but they escape and join Grant and Sattler. Together they all try to escape by the front entrance, but then are cornered by the raptors, only they escape when the Tyrannosaurus appears and kills the raptors.

Next there are those films and stories where whatever the climax is it's revealed to have 'all been a dream'. THE DEVIL'S

ADVOCATE and to some degree JACOB'S LADDER and THE CABINET OF DR CALIGARI, plus NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET with its endless reversals, come into this category. Then there are stories where what seems to be the climax is then topped by yet another climax, though sometimes here the Law of Diminishing Returns can come into force. TRUE LIES, for examples, has a nuclear explosion, but then tries to build to an even bigger climax, though it arguably does so with mixed success. The same could be said for SLEEPY HOLLOW where what you think is a climax, the sequence at the windmill, then goes on to yet another.



A different type of anti-climax is where there is no substantial alteration in circumstances. The father, for example, in MEET ME IN ST LOUIS decides the family will move to New York, but when he witnesses how upset his children are at the idea he changes his mind. But again, this isn't necessarily a bad thing, and besides the whole point of MEET ME IN ST LOUIS is that the small town values seen through all the seasons of the year are ultimately preferable to those of city life and New York.

An anti-climax then does not necessarily come with a negative or down ending, it's just a different kind of ending with a different set of values. It can be abrupt, ironic, and intentionally small, or indeed the result of telling the story through gradual change rather than the fireworks of a big bang climax.

"Where I'm living is not a storybook world. It's the real world, full of gaps and inconsistencies and anticlimaxes."
Haruki Murakami



LUBOV: My other worry is Varya. She's used to getting up early and to work, and now she's no work to do she's like a fish out of water. She's grown thin and pale, and she cries, poor thing… [Pause] You know very well, Ermolai Alexeyevitch, that I used to hope to marry her to you, and I suppose you are going to marry somebody? [Whispers to ANYA, who nods to CHARLOTTA, and they both go out] She loves you, she's your sort, and I don't understand, I really don't, why you seem to be keeping away from each other. I don't understand!
LOPAKHIN: To tell the truth, I don't understand it myself. It's all so strange… If there's still time, I'll be ready at once… Let's get it over, once and for all; I don't feel as if I could ever propose to her without you.
LUBOV: Excellent. It'll only take a minute. I'll call her.
From THE CHERRY ORCHARD by Anton Chekhov

Anti-climax – On and Off stage Actions

Modern story gurus insist that your climax is an obligatory scene and must be presented rather than reported second-hand. However, in Greek drama if the confrontational climax was violent it was never seen but rather given in a speech by someone who had observed the action. In fact, that's where we get our term obscene, that is it is an event that goes on *ob* (off) *skene* (stage). A fine example in Greek drama of reported speech (sometimes called the 'Messenger Speech') is the description and summary of the battle of Salamis from THE PERSIANS by Aeschylus, who, incidentally, was young enough to have witnessed it for himself. Here, of course, the action had to be reported as it was a battle. A modern example of a climax that is reported rather than presented directly on stage can be found in the courtroom drama THE WINSLOW BOY where the not guilty verdict and the reactions of the family are all told through one of the servants. And a brilliant piece of dramatic writing it is.



The sale of the cherry orchard in Anton Chekhov's play THE CHERRY ORCHARD also happens off-stage, but of course Chekhov's

main interest isn't the cherry orchard itself, in fact no one seems to even care about it that much. No, Chekhov's play is more about the emotional and sexual frustrations of the interconnecting characters who are gathered during time the cherry orchard is being sold. That said, since these interactions lead nowhere or they flunk their chance at happiness when the opportunity arises, as with Lopakhin, it could be argued that it is these various unfulfilled relationships which are the true climaxes of THE CHERRY ORCHARD. And, as each ends in a cul-de-sac, all are an anti-climax in their own way.

LOPAKHIN: And I'm off to Kharkov at once… by this train. I've a lot of business on hand. I'm leaving Epikhodov here… I've taken him on.

VARYA. Well, well!

LOPAKHIN: Last year at this time the snow was already falling, if you remember, and now it's nice and sunny. Only it's rather cold… There's three degrees of frost.

VARYA. I didn't look. [Pause] And our thermometer's broke…

VOICE AT THE DOOR: Ermolai Alexeyevitch!

LOPAKHIN: [As if he has long been waiting to be called] This minute. [Exits quickly.]

[VARYA puts her face on a bundle of clothes and weeps gently. The door opens and LUBOV ANDREYEVNA enters carefully.]

LUBOV: Well?

From THE CHERRY ORCHARD by Anton Chekhov



"Plots are either simple or complex, for the actions in real life, of which the plots are an imitation, obviously show a similar distinction. An action which is one and continuous in the sense above defined, I call simple, when the change of fortune takes place without reversal of the situation and without recognition."
Aristotle in POETICS

Anti-climax – Gradation

When Aristotle talked about 'simple plots' he essentially saying that there are plots without a big twist or the sudden revelation of a truth. In this sense then we might add here in terms those stories where there is a gradation of change which is steady and consistent but as a result lack a single and distinct moment of either crisis or climax. Examples of this structure can be found in tales of slow decline to self-destruction such as LEAVING LAS VEGAS, THE ROSE and THE WHALE. The climax, at least in part, is simple the fact that they die. This doesn't necessarily mean that it's a poorly constructed tale or that the protagonist is uninteresting. Indeed, the tale may even have a tragic edge if the protagonist was offered an opportunity to escape or avoid their death.

LIZ: You have congestive heart failure. If you don't go to the hospital, you'll be dead by the weekend. You. Will. Die. Silence.
CHARLIE: Then I should probably keep working, I have a lot of essays this week–
LIZ: Goddammit.
CHARLIE: I know, I'm an awful person. I know. I'm sorry.
From THE WHALE, by Samuel D. Hunter



"A deus ex machina will never appear in real life so you best make other arrangements."
Marisha Pessl, SPECIAL TOPICS IN CALAMITY PHYSICS

The *Deus ex Machina*

The *deus ex machina* is a specific type of anti-climax where some sort of outside agency, instrument or action interjects at the point of the climax of the tale. In old westerns this would be the unexpected arrival of the cavalry, which has led to phrases such as 'the cavalry turned up just in time' or, more cynically, 'we can't just wait for the cavalry because it ain't coming.' What makes then a *deus ex machina* an anti-climax is that it takes the crisis moment of the protagonist's hands and that is usually seen as poor storytelling. However, the *deus ex machina* need not necessarily be a wrong or bad way to end a drama because, depending on context, it is a device that can be used very effectively. It has a bad reputation partly because Aristotle disliked it so much. But Aristotle isn't always right, so let's now go back its Greek origins and unpick that negative attitude a little bit.

The term *deus ex machina* is clearly Latin but it comes from the Greek theatre's use of the *mekhane*, literally the mechanism (possibly a crane or lift) that allowed the gods to descend from on high and impose on the drama an arbitrary resolution. And even though we are talking about theatre from over two and a half thousand years ago, there's no reason to think that this was a clumsily built mechanism. After all, the Greeks of the classical period were great ship builders and a steady platform moving up and down by means of ropes and pulleys would certainly have been within their capabilities. Anyway, however it worked, Aristotle didn't like it and in his POETICS singled out the dramas of one particular but unnamed playwright who used it, in Aristotle's view, much too frequently. Many believe this dramatist to have been Euripides, who gained a poor reputation as a result of this cardinal sin. But perhaps the blanket condemnation of the *deus ex machina* is a little unfair.



The first question to ask in accessing Aristotle's denunciation of the *deus ex machina* is: Are the uses of this theatrical device always detrimental to drama? And, secondly: Was Aristotle fair on

Euripides, assuming it was Euripides to whom he was referring? To both of these questions, the answer must be is 'No'. Take, for example, the play ORESTES by Euripides. ORESTES concerns what we would call a hostage situation where Orestes and Electra are essentially bungling criminals on the run. The play ends on the brink of mutual destruction, but then the god Apollo comes down via the *deus ex machina* and sets everything right by insisting the conflicting parties involved in the stand-off all marry each other. Absurd? Yes, but it's meant to be perverse and contrary.

And there are modern examples of the same use of irony. The 'happy endings' of both WILD AT HEART and BRAZIL have god-like descents from above to save the lives of the protagonists, but surely no who has watched those film would consider them to be 'real'. Compare these with the intentionally jarring ending of Euripides's ORESTES and you'll begin to question whether Aristotle, clever though he was, lacked a sense and understanding of irony.

The *deus ex machina* then, if used intelligently and cleverly, can be a brilliant theatrical and dramatic tool. Spielberg's RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARC has a near literal *deus ex machina*, and who would want to change the ending of WAKING NED, where the priest in his machine, his car, kills the tell-tale old lady thus saving the fortune won on the lottery for the whole village?

All that said, the essential Story Craft point is that no solution at the moment of crisis that leads to the climax should be easy, nor

should it comes from seemingly nowhere, for if it does, it takes the power and the drama out the protagonist's hands. The arrival of the cavalry to save the day in those old westerns always feels something of a cheat. Certainly the gunshot at the climax of NORTH BY NORTHWEST, the convenient bucket of water placed near the witch in THE WIZARD OF OZ, the air raid at the end of SAVING PRIVATE RYAN and the fortuitous intervention of the T-Rex in JURASSIC PARK are all examples of the *deus ex machina* ant-climax in that they are agencies and instruments that come from outside and rescue, as it were, the protagonists when all seems lost. And because of that they reveal, perhaps, a certain weakness in the plot construction. And you might add here the homing beacon in DANTE'S PEAK which, like Ariadne's thread, allows those in the mine to be rescued a little too easily.

But now a question: Is it strictly speaking a *deus ex machina* if it's always been there in plain sight from the beginning? In THE DAY OF THE TRIFFIDS, the triffids are ultimately killed by sea water and in WAR OF THE WORLDS it's unseen but always present germs and bacteria that kill off the aliens who have no immunity. Well, it's a moot point. In INDEPENDENCE DAY it's also a 'virus' of sorts, only it's a modern computer virus, but here the protagonists still have to take action to infect the Mother Ship.

And now another question: what if the *deus ex machina* isn't positive at all? What if it doesn't save the protagonists but kills

them? In DAS BOOT, for example, an allied bomb raid kills many of the crew we've grown to know and care about.

All these questions and issues suggest perhaps that the use, or not use, of the *deus ex machina* is more nuanced than many story gurus would have us believe.

Some more thoughts on the *deus ex machina*

"Deus ex machina not only erases all meaning and emotion, it's an insult to the audience. Each of us knows we must choose and act, for better or worse, to determine the meaning of our lives...Deus ex machina is an insult because it is a lie."
Robert McKee, STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES

"DOCTOR WHO stories are resolved by a Time Lord who emerges from a Time Machine — they're ALL deus ex machina."
Steven Moffat, television producer and writer

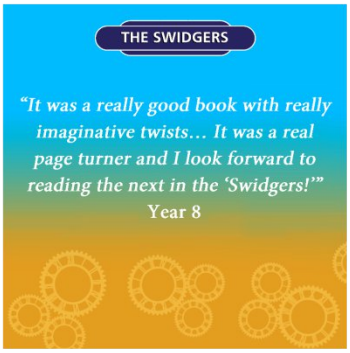
"By now the two men were tied securely to their chairs. Powerscourt found he could just about move his arms. If there was a deus out there somewhere, he said to himself, he wished he would hurry up and get out of his machina."
David Dickinson, DEATH ON THE NEVSKII PROSPEKT

"Readers tend to tolerate such 'accidents' ... when they get the characters into trouble but they're less accepting when the author uses them to rescue people. The deus ex machina ... in one stroke it renders meaningless all the efforts of the cast."
Thomas McCormack, book editor and playwright

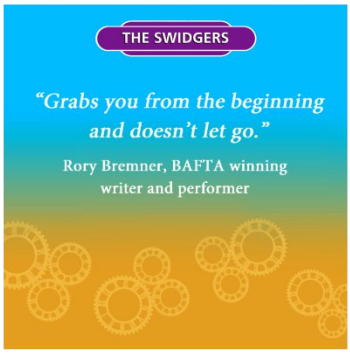
"Genies are only fun in the movies if you define and limit their powers."
Roger Ebert, American film critic

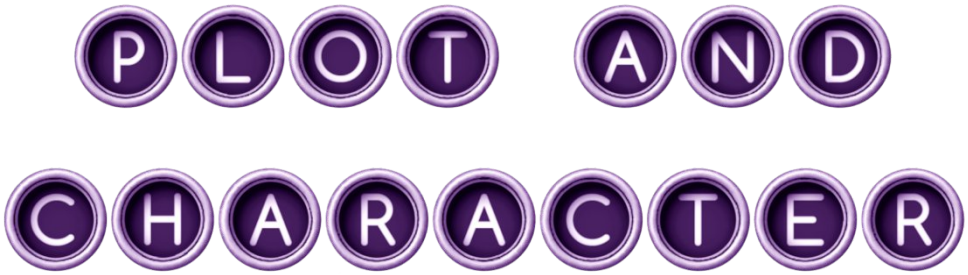
"Introduction of deus ex machina is a tell-tale sign of sloppy plotting."
Mike Mehalek, writer

"I've been suddenly rescued by some force utterly outside of the context of this narrative! How... unsatisfying."
Billy Dare, TOM THE DANCING BUG









The Essentials of Plot – Resolution

"To the Victorian novelists endings were apt to be particularly troublesome, because they were always under pressure from readers and publishers to provide a happy one. The last chapter was known in the trade as the 'wind-up', which Henry James sarcastically described as 'a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs and cheerful remarks.' James himself pioneered the 'open' ending characteristic of modern fiction, often stopping the novel in the middle of a conversation, leaving a phrase hanging resonantly, but ambiguously, in the air."
David Lodge, THE ART OF FICTION (1992)

Resolution and Dénouement

The resolution. The problem has been resolved, the action journey is complete and the hero has become a different self. There is now a new equilibrium or the status has returned to what it was. So what next?

The resolution could be said to be the breathing space after the climax, and in theatre plays, this part of a story is traditionally called the 'dénouement' (from the French word *dénouer* meaning

'unknot'), and, as David Lodge points out, it was known as the 'wind-up' in publishing during the Victorian era. If the opening of a story starts with '*Once upon a time...*', then it's at the end that you get the resolution that says '*And they all lived happily ever after*.' And there's a comparison with music here in that 'resolution' in western tonal music is the move of a note or chord from dissonance to a consonance. And so, in a way, the same can be said for resolution in Story.



The resolution is the final element of a story or narrative in which the strands of the plot are drawn together, loose ends reconnected, and matters that need to be explained are cleared up. An example of this is in detective fiction where a character typically says to the detective, "But there's on thing I still don't understand…" The dynamics of a resolution can be fast or slow. Hitchcock liked a quick dénouement, as in NORTH BY NORTHWEST, where it only takes thirty seconds or so for Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) and Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint) to be rescued from a mountain top, for the microfilm to be restored to the Secret Service, and for Roger and Eve

then to get married and go on their honeymoon. On the other hand, one of the most ponderous Resolutions is Greta Garbo in QUEEN CHRISTINA looking out to sea. In the theatre, this would be referred to as a 'slow curtain'.

Denouement, noun. The final part of a play, film, or narrative in which the strands of the plot are drawn together and matters are explained or resolved. Origin, mid 18th century, French dénouement, from dénouer 'unknot'.
Dictionary definition of 'denouement'



"I have by me, for my comfort, two strange white flowers – shrivelled now, and brown and flat and brittle – to witness that even when mind and strength had gone, gratitude and a mutual tenderness still lived on in the heart of man."
From THE TIME MACHINE, by H.G. Wells

Resolution: Return and Reward

Stories often feature some sort of reward when the protagonists returns home as part of the resolution. In Agatha Christie's detective fiction, for example, Poirot gets to eat and Miss Marple has her cup of tea and cake back in her homely world of St Mary Mead. In fantasy fiction, where the Hero has travelled to another world, a token of that world is brought back with them. A

strange flower, for example, is brought back by the Time Traveller in THE TIME MACHINE.

The 'reward' in DEAD POET'S SOCIETY is not physical: it is the boys standing on their desk to show solidarity with Keaton who has just been sacked. You could even argue that it is the climax of the tale in that Keaton came to the school to make a difference. And seeing the boys standing on the desks certainly shows Keaton has changed minds, even if it has resulted in his dismissal.

TODD ANDERSON: [stands up on his desk] O Captain! My Captain!
MR. NOLAN: Sit down, Mr. Anderson! Do you hear me? Sit down! Sit down! This is your final warning, Anderson. How dare you? Do you hear me?
KNOX OVERSTREET: [climbs up onto his desk] O Captain! My Captain!
MR. NOLAN: Mr. Overstreet, I warn you! Sit down!
[Pitts climbs onto his desk, followed by Meeks, then over half the class, one by one]
MR. NOLAN: Sit down! Sit down. All of you. I want you seated. Sit down. Leave, Mr. Keating. All of you, down. I want you seated. Do you hear me? Sit down!
JOHN KEATING: Thank you, boys. Thank you.
From DEAD POETS SOCIETY, directed by Peter Weir, and written by Tom Schulman



EXT. BUILDING: There in the doorway is Karl, clothing and body scorched. Easily as crusted in dirt and blood as McClane, he holds his machine gun. As the crowd panics trying to escape, Karl locks eyes with McClane and levels his gun. McClane throws Holly to the ground. A lone gunshot stops Karl knocking him back. McClane looks round to see Powell still sighting down the barrel of his .38. His hand is rock steady.

From DIE HARD, directed by John McTiernan, screenplay by Jeb Stuart and Steven E. de Souz, based on the book NOTHING LASTS FOREVER by Roderick Thorp

Resolution and Sub-plots

Most sub-plots end before the main plot but occasionally sub-plots climax after the main plot action. This is often the case where allies of the protagonist have played a key part in the plot. In DIE HARD, for example, the LAPD sergeant Al Powell (Reginald VelJohnson) gets his own climactic moment when he shoots the side-kick of the villain who is about to kill McLane. Sergeant Powell is also given his own back story involving an accidental shooting which makes this moment all the more powerful. And DIE HARD has a second sub-plot pay-off where the news man, Richard Thornburg (William Atherton), whose report put John McClane in danger, is given a good old wallop by Mrs McClane (Bonnie Bedelia).

RICHARD THORNBURG: Mr McClane… Mrs McClane… now that it's all over, after this incredible ordeal, what are your feelings?
[MRS MCCLANE PUNCHES THORNBURG]
ARGYLE: Merry Christmas.

JOHN MCCLANE: Merry Christmas, Argyle.
RICHARD THORNBURG: [to the camera] Did ya get that?
ARGYLE: [Argyle shuts the limo door] If this is their idea of Christmas, I gotta be here for New Year's.
From the screenplay of DIE HARD.



"Dénouement is the rest that comes when all the disparate plot lines of a story, gnarled and taut, have been untied and an order has come about that brings a new moment of shalom."
Dan B. Allender, prominent Christian therapist, author, professor, and speaker

Resolutions – Variations

The resolution can sometimes be thought of as kind of decompression chamber, where characters readjust to their new lives. Occasionally this will mean a time break after the climax of the story - '*Three months later*' or something similar may appear on the screen and the resolution allows you, the reader or viewer, to get some sense of the afterlife of the characters. The resolution also allows a storyteller to return to their theme. The theme in LION KING is *The Circle of Life* and so LION KING ends with the birth of new life and so a new beginning.

Resolutions come in different forms depending on the way the story has been told. Spike Milligan's playful novel PUCKOON, for example, has a Resolution with a neat meta-fictional twist:

> A great silence settled over the land. Ten years have passed since that fateful day, ten years have journeyed to their end and Puckoon once again was lost in its unhurried ways. The Church was restored by a rich Catholic, Father Rudden found his faith in a pair of new boots. The mute steeple clock once again ticked out with a new life, the border posts were never rebuilt, to this day no one is quite sure exactly where the border lies, in fact each and every character in the picture returned to his or her own ways, all except one man, a Roman Soldier hanging from a tree with a rusty organ pipe lodged over his head, from where cam a muffled voice. "You can't leave me like this!"
>
> "Oh, can't I?"

Sometimes, too, if the story is part of a series, you might even get the start or 'taster' for the next story or sequel. This happens at the end of BACK TO THE FUTURE II which acts almost as a promo for BACK TO THE FUTURE III (BACK TO THE FUTURE II and BACK TO THE FUTURE III where made back-to-back).

There are as well stories with no Resolution as such. Or rather what happens next is implied rather than explicitly presented. And this is the case with both BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID and THELMA & LOUISE. In the first, the two gunmen leave their last stand salon and come out fighting, facing an impossible onslaught of bullets. In the second, THELMA & LOUISE decide to drive their car

over the edge and into to the Grand Canyon. Both movies end on a cinematic freeze frame.

"CLOSE-UP – BUTCH AND SUNDANCE.
THE CAMERA FREEZES THEM. And as it does, a tremendous fuselage of shots is heard, then another, even louder, and more and more shots, building in temp and sound. The shots continue to sound.
Butch and Sundance remain frozen.
FINAL FADE OUT.
THE END
From the screenplay of BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID by William Goldman



"We are now, reader, arrived at the last stage of our long journey. As we have, therefore, travelled together through so many pages, let us behave to one another like fellow-travellers in a stage coach, who have passed several days in the company of each other; and who, notwithstanding any bickerings or little animosities which may have occurred on the road, generally make all up at last, and mount, for the last time, into their vehicle with cheerfulness and good humour; since after this one stage, it may possibly happen to us, as it commonly happens to them, never to meet more. As I have here taken up this simile, give me leave to carry it a little farther. I intend, then, in this last book, to imitate the good company I have mentioned in their last journey. Now, it is well known that all jokes and raillery are at this time laid aside; whatever characters any of

the passengers have for the jest-sake personated on the road are now thrown off, and the conversation is usually plain and serious. In the same manner, if I have now and then, in the course of this work, indulged any pleasantry for thy entertainment, I shall here lay it down. The variety of matter, indeed, which I shall be obliged to cram into this book, will afford no room for any of those ludicrous observations which I have elsewhere made, and which may sometimes, perhaps, have prevented thee from taking a nap when it was beginning to steal upon thee. In this last book thou wilt find nothing (or at most very little) of that nature. All will be plain narrative only; and, indeed, when thou hast perused the many great events which this book will produce, thou wilt think the number of pages contained in it scarce sufficient to tell the story."
Henry Fielding, *A Farewell to the Reader*, the last book of TOM JONES

Epilogue

Epilogues are a specific form of resolution. Epilogue comes from the Greek words *epi*, meaning 'in addition', and *logos*, meaning 'word'. Think after-thought or afterword. Epilogue in this sense is usually defined as piece of writing at the end of a work of literature or drama that is used to bring closure to the work. Usually too the epilogue offers a particular perspective on the story where the author may step forward and directly address the reader and comment on what has occurred.

The epilogue may, as in the case of the voice-over in STAND BY ME and THE DEAD and the text on the screen at the end of AMERICAN GRAFFITI, not only give a sense of the characters' lives, but even reveal what happens to them in the future. In the case of

AMERICAN GRAFFITI, for example, we are told how two of the characters died, one was killed by a drunk driver and another was reported missing in action. And it's a strange feeling when we, as an audience, invest our time and emotion in characters who, in one or two lines of text or voice-over, are discovered to be now dead.

Some more thoughts on epilogues…

ROSALIND: It is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue; but it is no more unhandsome than to see the lord the prologue. If it be true that good wine needs no bush, 'tis true that a good play needs no epilogue. Yet to good wine they do use good bushes; and good plays prove the better by the help of good epilogues. What a case am I in, then, that am neither a good epilogue nor cannot insinuate with you in the behalf of a good play! I am not furnished like a beggar; therefore to beg will not become me: my way is to conjure you; and I'll begin with the women. I charge you, O women, for the love you bear to men, to like as much of this play as please you: and I charge you, O men, for the love you bear to women;--as I perceive by your simpering, none of you hates them,--that between you and the women the play may please. If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not; and, I am sure, as many as have good beards, or good faces, or sweet breaths, will, for my kind offer, when I make curtsy, bid me farewell. If it be true that good wine needs no bush, 'tis true that a good play needs no epilogue."

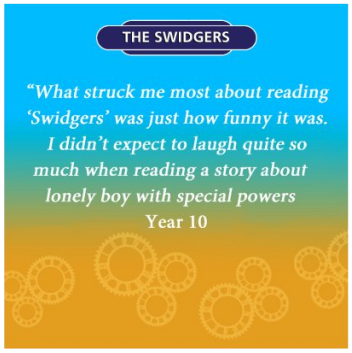
William Shakespeare, AS YOU LIKE IT, Act 5, scene 4, Epilogue

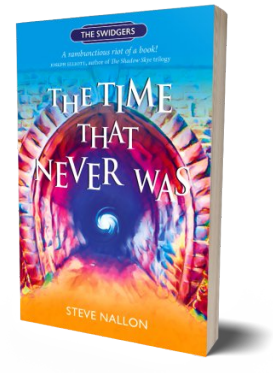
"Hold, are you mad? you damn'd confounded Dog,
I am to rise, and speak the Epilogue."

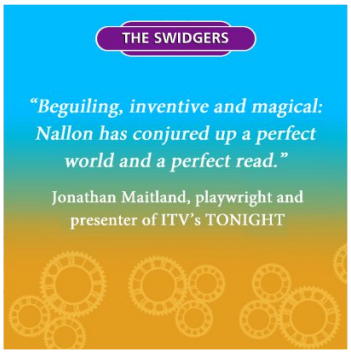
John Dryden

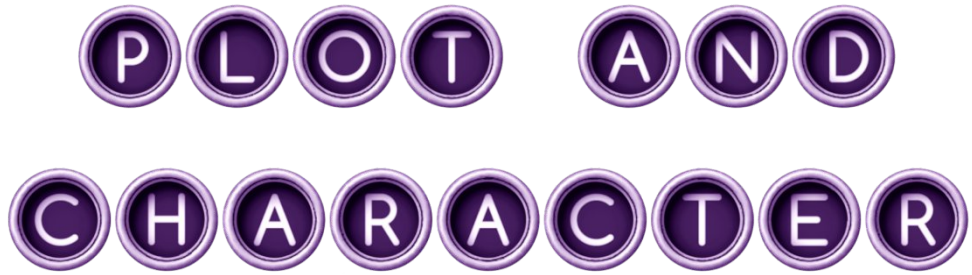
"If a person survives an ordinary span of sixty years or more, there is every chance that his or her life as a shapely story has ended and all that remains to be experienced is epilogue. Life is not over, but the story is."

Kurt Vonnegut, writer









Some Famous Last Lines

Last lines by their nature have a special power in Story, for they can stay in the mind long after much of rest is forgotten. Here, then, are a few final lines, some famous, some less so, from novels, movies and plays…

"But she didn't answer; already she was rushing down the slope. He saw her in time to rise to his feet; she stopped then, several yards away, and for a few seconds both was staring at each other, hard and still and silent. Then he whispered something I couldn't hear; but I knew in a flash that the gap was closed, that the random years were at an end, that the past and the future would join. She knew this too, for she ran into his arms calling out: 'Oh, Smithy – Smithy – Smithy – it may not be too late!'"
From RANDOM HARVEST by James Hilton

"Mr. Pickwick himself continued to reside in his new house, employing his leisure hours in arranging the memoranda which he afterwards presented to the secretary of the once famous club, or in hearing Sam Weller read aloud, with such remarks as suggested themselves to his mind, which never failed to afford Mr. Pickwick great amusement. He was much troubled at first, by the numerous applications made to him by Mr. Snodgrass, Mr. Winkle, and Mr. Trundle, to act as godfather to their offspring; but he has become used to it now, and officiates as a matter of course. He never had

occasion to regret his bounty to Mr. Jingle; for both that person and Job Trotter became, in time, worthy members of society, although they have always steadily objected to return to the scenes of their old haunts and temptations. Mr. Pickwick is somewhat infirm now; but he retains all his former juvenility of spirit, and may still be frequently seen, contemplating the pictures in the Dulwich Gallery, or enjoying a walk about the pleasant neighbourhood on a fine day. He is known by all the poor people about, who never fail to take their hats off, as he passes, with great respect. The children idolise him, and so indeed does the whole neighbourhood. Every year he repairs to a large family merry-making at Mr. Wardle's; on this, as on all other occasions, he is invariably attended by the faithful Sam, between whom and his master there exists a steady and reciprocal attachment which nothing but death will terminate."
From THE PICKWICK PAPERS by Charles Dickens

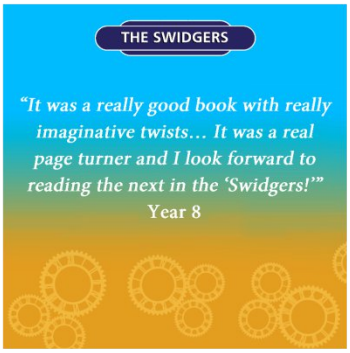
"'Well, Charlie,' said Grandpa Joe. 'It's certainly been a busy day.' 'It's not over yet,' Charlie said, laughing. 'It hasn't even begun.'"
From THE COMPLETE ADVENTURES OF CHARLIE AND MR WILLY WONKA by Rolad Dahl

"He picked up the novel which Miss Polski had left on his desk and settled down to await his loved one's final combustion."
From THE LOVED ONE by Evelyn Waugh

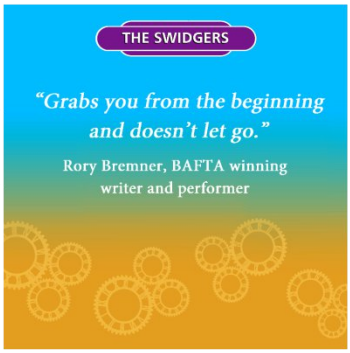
"Two days later, a man who looked nothing like a maintenance engineer walked into JFK International Airport. He was about to board a flight to Switzerland. But first of all he visited a flower shop and order a dozen black tulips to be sent to a certain address. The man paid with cash. He didn't leave a name."
From ALEX RIDER: STORMBREAKER by Anthony Horowitz

"The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the utmost ends of the earth flowed sombre

under an overcast sky — seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness."
Joseph Conrad, HEART OF DARKNESS







"So the years pass, and repeat each other; so the same events revolve into the cycle of time. What will be the next adventure of the Moonstone? Who can tell?"
From THE MOONSTONE by Wilkie Collins

"After about a quarter of an hour, he got the coachman and one of the footmen and crept upstairs. They knocked, but there was no reply. They called out. Everything was still. Finally, after vainly trying to force the door, they got on the roof and dropped down on to the balcony. The windows yielded easily – their bolts were old.

"When they entered, they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognised who it was."
From THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY by Oscar Wilde

"My husband remained there some time after me to settle our affairs, and at first I had intended to go back to him, but at his desire I altered that resolution, and he is come over to England also,

where we resolve to spend the remainder of our years in sincere penitence for the wicked lives we have lived."
Daniel Defoe, MOLL FLANDERS

"He turned away to give them time to pull themselves together; and waited, allowing his eyes to rest on the trim cruiser in the distance." **William Golding, LORD OF THE FLIES**

"I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before.
Mark Twain, ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

"Lastly, she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood: and how she would gather about her other little children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago: and how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days.
Lewis Carroll, ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND

"'God's in his heaven, all's right with the world,' whispered Anne softly."
Lucy Maud Montgomery, ANNE OF GREEN GABLES

"But, in spite of these deficiencies, the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union."
Jane Austen, EMMA

"I do wish we could chat longer, but I'm having an old friend for dinner..."
Hannibal Lector (Anthony Hopkins) in THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS

"Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."
Rick (Humphrey Bogart) in CASABLANCA

"You maniacs! You blew it up! Ah, damn you! God damn you all to hell!"
George Taylor (Charlton Heston) in PLANET OF THE APES

"The name's Bond. James Bond."
007 (Daniel Craig) in CASINO ROYALE

"Well, nobody's perfect."
Osgood Fielding III (Joe E Brown) in SOME LIKE IT HOT

"That'll do, Pig. That'll do."
Farmer Hoggett (James Cromwell) in BABE

"I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?"
The Writer (Richard Dreyfuss) in STAND BY ME

"In case I don't see you, good afternoon, good evening, and goodnight."
Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) in THE TRUMAN SHOW

"There's no place like home!"
Dorothy Gale (Judy Garland) in THE WIZARD OF OZ

"This is Ripley, last survivor of the Nostromo, signing off."
Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in ALIEN

"I'm not even gonna swat that fly. I hope they are watching. They'll see. They'll see and they'll know and they'll say, 'Why, she wouldn't even harm a fly'..."
Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) in PSYCHO

"Oh, no! It wasn't the airplanes. It was Beauty killed the Beast."
Carl Denham (Robert Armstrong) in KING KONG

"Why don't we just wait here for a little while... see what happens..."
MacReady (Kurt Russell) in THE THING

"After all, tomorrow is another day."
Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh) in GONE WITH THE WIND

"Where we go from there is a choice I leave to you."
Neo (Keanu Reeves) THE MATRIX

"Now, where was I?"
Leonard (Guy Pearce) in MEMENTO

"I'll be right here..."
E.T. in E.T. THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL

"The horror, the horror..."
Colonel Walter E. Kurtz (Marlon Brando) APOCALYPSE NOW

"Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown.
Lawrence Walsh (Joe Mantell) in CHINATOWN

"Right after I got here, I ordered some spaghetti with marinara sauce and I got egg noodles and ketchup. I'm an average nobody. I get to live the rest of my life like a schnook."
Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) in GOODFELLAS

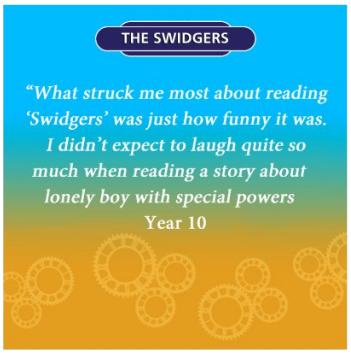
"Hang on, lads; I've got a great idea."
Charlie Croker (Michael Caine) in THE ITALIAN JOB

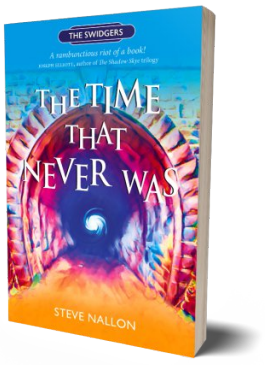
"I was cured all right!"
Alex (Malcolm McDowell) in A CLOCKWORK ORANGE

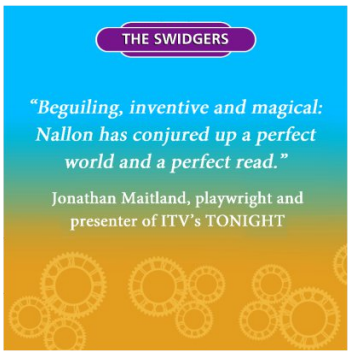
Some final thoughts on endings…

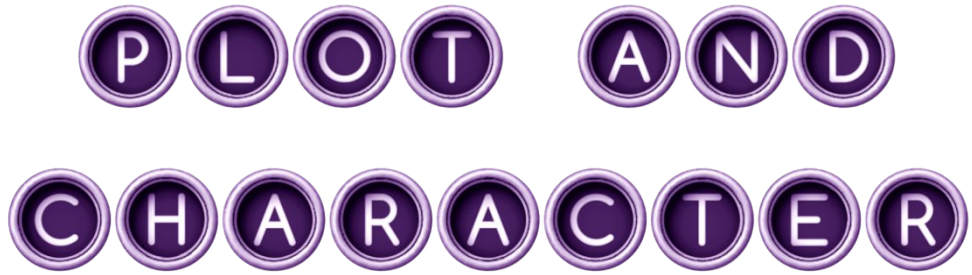
"When is the story over? When the hero gets it. The disorder is inherent in the story. What we are trying to do is create order."
David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM

'Let us assume a bold front and go forward together. Let us carry the fight against ignorance to the four corners of the earth because it is a fight which concerns us all. And now, finally my friends, in conclusion, let me say just this: … ' (BIG SILENCE)
Peter Sellers, '*Party Political Speech*' 1958









Quotes and Thoughts on Structure and Plot

Some thoughts on structure and dramatic construction from novelists, screenwriter and dramatists….

"Some people thought that traditional architecture had been too stifling, and so they designed and built a lot of counterculture buildings. These building proved unlivable. Their design didn't begin with the idea of the building's purpose: it began with the idea of how the architect 'felt'… they didn't serve the purpose of the inhabitants. They all either fell down or are falling down or should be torn down."

David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM

"In nearly all good fiction, the basic – all but inescapable – plot form is: A central character wants something, goes after it despite opposition (perhaps including his own doubts), and so arrives at a win, lose, or draw."

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

"We must define the difference between the story and the dramatic construction. The story is the actual happening. The dramatic construction is the way in which this happening is told. The story is varied and rich as life and the world. The dramatic construction consists of a limited number of rules which are applied

in order to get certain effects. The story springs from the imagination of the author; the dramatic construction results from his technique. The story is the creation; the dramatic construction is the form into which this creation must be poured."
Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

"When the film is correctly designed, the subconscious and the conscious are in alignment, and we need to hear what happens next. The audience is ordering the events just as the author did, so we are in touch with both his conscious and unconscious mind. We have becomes involved in the story."
David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM



Some more thoughts on plot…

"A good plot has to have something happening in it that is of interest to the reader, and we hope to the characters. Or maybe I'll put that the other way around – that is of interest to the characters, and we hope to the reader."
Margaret Atwood

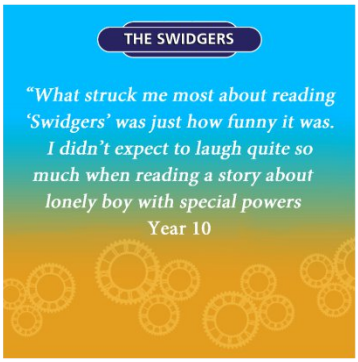
"My books are primarily plot driven but the best plot in the world is useless if you don't populate them with characters that readers can care about."
Jeffery Deaver

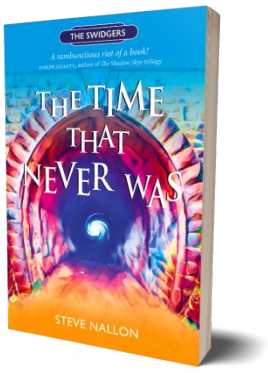
"If time emplotment reveals meaning by putting events in a particular order, then space emplotment works by juxtaposition."
David Edgar, HOW PLAYS WORK

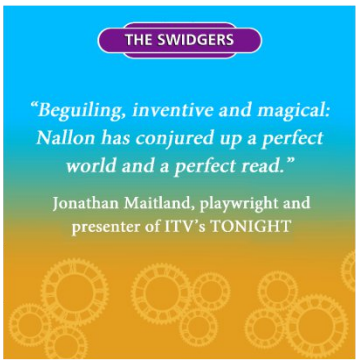
"Plot is just a fancy way of saying 'And then…'"
Erica Jong

"I like writing non-fiction – and when you pick a [non-fiction] subject, it saves you the hassle of coming up with a plot."
Richard Hell

"The characters are always the focal point of a book for me, whether I'm writing or reading. I may enjoy a book that has an intriguing mystery or a good plot, but to become one of my real favourites, it has to have great characters."
Candace Camp







Some thoughts on plot from those writers not so keen on it…

"I distrust plot for two reasons: first, because our lives are largely plotless, even when you add in all the reasonable precautions and careful planning; and second, because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible. It's best that I can

be clear about this as I can – I want you to understand that my basic belief about making stories is pretty much that they make themselves."
Stephen King, ON WRITING

"Life has no plot, why must films or fiction?"
Jim Jarmusch

"The moment I think of a good plot, I find that the book becomes almost impossible to write, because I know I won't believe it. Life may consist of people plotting all the time, but the plots rarely develop. We decide: 'I'll make this move in my life, and that should result in the following' – then life confounds us."
Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

"The plot is not very important to me, though a novel must have one, of course. It's just a line to hang the washing on."
Ivy Compton-Burnett

"Plot as such is not a major ingredient in my novels ... it's often better to sail on the unconscious sea."
Richard Adams

"I am writing to a rhythm and not to a plot."
Virginia Woolf

"Please remember… that there is a huge difference between story and plot. Story is honourable and trustworthy; plot is shifty, and best kept under house arrest."
Stephen King, ON WRITING

"A best-seller strategy is to keep cooking up new ingredients for the story. But beware! Plot <u>is</u> equal to a drug. It can stimulate a novelist into hordes of narrative energy, and I will certainly keep

the reader on the page, but sooner or later, plot presents its bill, and dire exigencies come down upon the writer."
Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

"At the time I begin writing a novel, the last thing I want to do is follow a plot outline. To know too much at the start takes the pleasure out of discovering what the book is about"
Elmore Leonard

"Plot is, I think, the good writer's last resort and the dullard's first choice. The story which results from it is apt to feel artificial and laboured."
Stephen King, ON WRITING

"Tie your characters to a prearranged plot, and you are doing to them what we would do to our children if we carefully selected their colleges, their spouses, and their jobs without ever consulting them."
Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

"Life doesn't have plots and sub-plots and dénouements. It's just a big collection of loose ends and dangling threads that never get explained."
Grant Morrison

"If I had a plot that was all set in advance, why would I want go through the agony of writing the novel? A novel is a kind of exploration and discovery, for me at any rate."
Chaim Potok

"I hate when people ask what a book is about. People who read for plot, people who suck out the story like the cream filling in an Oreo, should stick to comic strips and soap operas… Every book worth a damn is about emotions and love and death and pain. It's about words. It's about a man dealing with life. Okay?"

J.R Moehringer

"Bill Buckley is wonderful at plots – his mind may work that way – but nobody lives and breathes in his novels with any more three-dimensionality than some passing movie star who can't act."
Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

Here are some thoughts, for and against, on the rule of three and the idea of Beginnings, Middles and Ends…

"We are all, like Scheherazade, under sentence of death, and we all think of our lives as narratives, with beginnings, middles, and ends."
A. S. Byatt

"Freud called music polymorphous perversity. We take pleasure in the music because it states a theme, the theme elaborates itself and then resolves, and we are then as pleased as if it were a philosophical revelation – even though the resolution is devoid of verbal content."
David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE

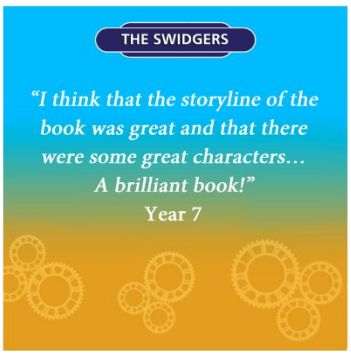
"There isn't any particular relationship between the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvellous moments seen all at one time."
Kurt Vonnegut

"Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

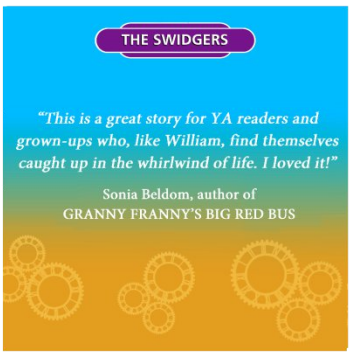
Winston Churchill, November 10, 1942

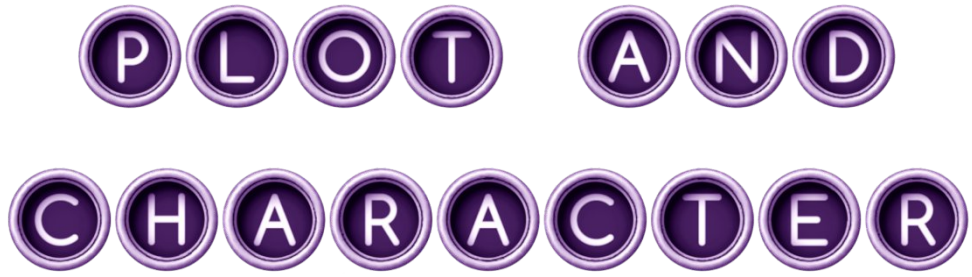
"I don't have any one way to tell a story. I don't have any rule book of how it's supposed to be done. But I've always said that if a story would be more emotionally involving told, beginning, middle, and end, I'll tell it that way. I won't jigsaw it, just to show what a clever boy I am. I don't do anything in my script just to be clever."
Quentin Tarantino

"After all, is it not the way we humans shape the universe, shape time itself? Do we not take the raw stuff of chaos and impose a beginning, middle, and end on it, like the simplest and most profound of folktales, to reflect the shapes of our own tiny lives? And if the physicists are right, that the physical world changes as it is observed, and we are its only known observers, then might we not be bending the entire chaotic universe, the eternal, ever-active Now, to fit that familiar form"
Tad Williams









Which is More Important, Plot or Character?

"Which comes first, character or story? There is no such thing as first, because a person is what happens to them. So a novel is characters interacting with events. Characters don't just exist in isolation. You're finding out who they are through how they interact, through the decisions they make, through how other people treat them, through how they react to how other people treat them. All of these interactions that change us, that reveal us to ourselves, that reveal us to other people, and therefore to the reader."

Margaret Atwood

Which is the More Important, Plot or Character?

You now know what a plot is and what it must have and so you can start to think about building your Story World. But before you do there's another question: *Which will take priority in the construction of that world, plot or character?* Aristotle famously favoured plot and E.M. Forster in ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL went more with character, whereas F. Scott Fitzgerald saw them as pretty much interchangeable – "Character is plot and plot is character".

"When you are drawing characters to serve a plot purpose, you tend to get flat, stereotyped, unliving characters."
Tom Rickman



"The character's attitude is more important than plot"
Stephen J. Cannell

Making Character the Priority

First, E.M. Forster. Part of Forster's argument in his 1927 treatise on the novel is that writers are human beings and human beings are people who think primarily in terms of people. "Since the novelist is himself a human being," says Forster, "there is an affinity between him and his subject matter which is absent in many other forms of art." In fact, Forster even entitles his two chapters on character *People*. For Forster there's Homo Sapiens and Homo Fictus but "we can know more about him than we can know about any of our fellow creatures, because his creator and narrator are one." And Forster makes a further point. "The speciality of the novel," he says, in comparing it to drama, "is that the writer can talk about his characters as well as through them, or can arrange for us to listen when they talk to themselves." Not surprisingly many novelists would agree with Forster on this. The nature of the novel allows us

to go inside the mind and heart of another human being in a way not possible in any other medium.



Forster's main problem with the primacy of plot over character is that the characters end up having to fit the measure of the plot and inevitably that results in them lacking a life of their own. Because plot requires a climax and resolution, he argues, novelists too often write that at the expense of character. So, he concluded, character, or 'people', must take priority in the creative process.

"At its most successful, theatre views things from a human standpoint. It is after all the most human in scale of all the performance media. My feeling is that that's also a good place for a dramatist to start, at the human level. As a playwright it may be your intention to build a vehicle to take us to the stars. But you make sure you have people aboad."
Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING



"In commercial fiction especially, everything in the story usually contributes directly to the plot. The shorter the story, the truer this is."
Nancy Kress

Aristotle on Plot

In POETICS, put plot first. Or at least the primacy in tragedy of *the imitation* [mimēsis] *of an action* [praxis]. However, when you actually sit down and read POETICS, you discover that *mimēsis* and *praxis* are very much abstract concepts that aren't that easily translated into English. But, as said, for 'action', purposeful intent is probably the nearest we'll get. As for *mimēsis,* it doesn't mean 'copy', as in a Xerox machine, nor does it mean 'representation', as in the symbols on an ordinance survey map. Most translators use 'imitation', but even this isn't quite right. So what does it mean?

When talking generally about *mimēsis* in POETICS Aristotle compares the different styles of two sculptures. Both capture their subject, he says, but they do it in different ways. What Aristotle then is perhaps really getting at with the concept of *mimēsis* is the artistic capturing of the essence of things and as people see people in different ways, there is no one answer. But even that definition isn't easily pinned down, yet it will have to do.

Aristotle is more detailed and clearer when it come to plot. He talks about *anagnorisis* (change from ignorance to knowledge) and *peripeteia* (unexpected change to the opposite), and here

anagnorisis and *peripeteia* have parallels in what modern story gurus would call ‘turning points’. Characters discover a person they thought they knew, isn’t really that kind of person at all. Or a character has a self-realisation of some sort about themselves. Then there is that sudden change when what you expect would go well goes wrong or indeed you what expect to be a disaster turns into a triumph. However, there are many writers who are suspicious of these elements of plot and argue that Aristotle has overemphasised what are essentially contrivances and cheap story tricks.



Aristotle in POETICS also divided plots into what he called ‘simple’ and ‘complex’. In simple plots there is a gradual change reversal of fortune across the whole drama, whereas in complex plots there’s *peripeteia* – that sudden reversal of the expected outcome – usually accompanied by *anagnorisis* – recognition or discovery – and it’s these together 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

piece than one with surprises and twists, and so could be described in Aristotle's terms as 'simple'. OEDIPUS REX on the other hand is most definitely a complex plot. 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, which then leads to Oedipus blinding himself, which in Greek thought, is a metaphor for inner death. Such action and change of fortunes in this good but flawed man leads to the key idea in Aristotle's theory of tragedy and that is the resulting feeling of *catharsis* or pity and fear in the audience.

One final point on Aristotle and his thinking on plot. It's important to remember that Aristotle came from a world where Fate (or *Ananke*) was the great controller of all life. Destiny, we might call it. And even Zeus, the top god of the Greeks, was not as powerful as *Ananke*. The play, of course, that Aristotle praises in POETICS is Sophocles' OEDIPUS REX, which is about a man whose family tried the thwart *Ananke*/Destiny to protect their son. And in Greek thinking, this simply cannot be done. In the play, the great irony is that the parents' actions lead to the very circumstances that were predicted. And in a further irony, in the course of OEDIPUS REX, Oedipus unwittingly uncovers the truth as to who he is and the murderous and unnatural actions he has committed. But the point here is that the 'plot' of Oedipus's life was already set out at his

birth. And Sophocles, at least in part, is acknowledging that belief and tradition.

"In our modern age, there are writers who have heaped scorn on the very idea of the primacy of story. I'd rather warm my hands on a sunlit ice floe than try to coax fire from the books they carve from glaciers."
Pat Conroy



"As a matter of writing philosophy, if there is one, I try not to ever plot a story. I try to write it from the character's point of view and see where it goes."
Andre Dubus

We are but Minor Characters in the Bigger Plot

Of course, you could make the philosophical point that since we are all born into this world – or out of this world, depending on your cultural and religious beliefs – that world, since it already exists, should take priority over us. In other words, we should know our place, for we are but passing through a world where we are little more than 'bit players' in a plot that's been going on for millions of

years. As old actors used to say, “A small role, dear boy. Nothing more than a cough and a spit.”

Well, that may be true of the real world, but the Story World is not the same as real life. And if character is the starting point, as E.M. Forster suggests it should be, then the Story World has to be created from and around character. In other words, in the creative world of Story, it’s the Story World that is born from character and not the other way round.

And no matter what your theological view on the concept of Intelligent Design, what you can say for certain is that any fictional Story World must have a ‘Creative Designer’. The writer. Be they intelligent or otherwise. And in creating that Story World and what happens in it, must be, at least for E.M. Forster and others, an expression of the hero.

That said, and respecting E.M. Forster’s point of view, perhaps the relationship between character and plot is more symbiotic and maybe it was F. Scott Fitzgerald who got it right when he said, “Character is plot and plot is character.”

“The characters are the plot. What they do and say and the things that happen to them are, in a sense, what the plot is. You can’t take character and plot apart from each other, really.”
Terry Pratchett, writer



"I'm always writing about character first. Plot, such as it is, comes from the characters."
Daniel Woodrell, American novelist and short story writer

Does the Problem in the Plot Come from the Outside or Inside?

A useful question to ask when comparing how a writer of novels thinks in comparison to a writer of screenplays is where does the problem of the plot come from? And what you often find is that for the writer of fiction the problem of the plot that needs to be solved usually comes from somewhere within a character, whereas for the Hollywood screenwriter that problem tends to come from outside. For novelists, or at least those of the more literary sort, problems usually arise psychologically from within – jealousy, doubt, sexual attraction and so on. In Hollywood, problems tend to come from without – alien invaders, false arrest, the sudden storm. But it's never that clear cut. Hollywood movies do deal with inner change and maturation, and even literary fiction usually has some sort of plot peg on which to hang its character exploration. That said, the emphases and stresses are completely different.



Some more thoughts on the relationship between 'Plot' and 'Character'…

"Characters make their own plot. The dimensions of the characters determine the action of the novel."
Harper Lee, novelist

"Plot is no more than footprints left in the snow after your characters have run by on their way to incredible destinations."
Ray Bradbury, ZEN IN THE ART OF WRITING

"Plot follows from character. Characters dictate the plot. If the plot is not driven by the inevitability of who the characters are and what they want, you will get a mechanically driven script."
Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

"I prefer to start with characters and a situation. Good characters make good films, even if the plot is rather thin. The reverse is rarely true."
Edward Dmytryk, ON SCREEN WRITING

"No two plays are the same. As we have seen, RELATIVELY SPEAKING in a sense is plot driven, with the characters to some extent tailored to fit plot demand. WAY UPSTREAM, despite initially inspiration coming from its choice of setting, is really theme- and character-driven."

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

"I think my sensibilities about storytelling and character just automatically come into play when I'm trying to work on any kind of narrative. For me, it doesn't really matter what the source of the narrative is. I will be looking for ways to make it into an intriguing story with empathetic characters."
Duncan Jones, filmmaker

"Plot grows out of character. If you focus on who the people in your story are, something is bound to happen… I've always sort of believed that these people inside me – these characters – know who they are and what they're about and what happens, and they need me to help get it down on paper because they don't type."
Anne Lamott, American novelist

"Never sell your characters short in order to meet the requirements of a gag or even the plot."
Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

"The real story is not the plot, but how characters unfold by it."
Vanna Bonta, Italian-American actress, inventor and writer of FLIGHT: A QUANTUM FICTION NOVEL.

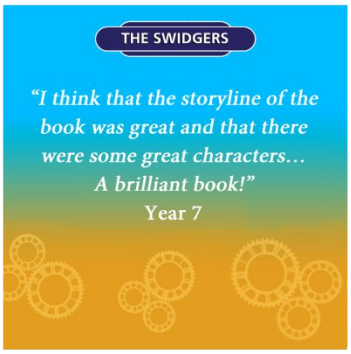
"Characters are incredibly important, but I tend to build them around the plot during the outline stage. However, once I'm writing the manuscript, the characters I'm writing dictate how the plot unfolds."
Aimee Carter, American writer of children's and young adult fiction

"The characters write the plot. Their natures do."
Norman Rush, American writer most of whose introspective novels and short stories are set in Botswana in the 1980s

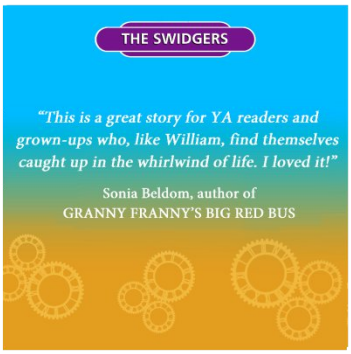
"New dramatic writing has banished conversational dialogue from the stage as a relic of dramaturgy based on conflict and exchange: any story, intrigue or plot that is too neatly tied up is suspect"
Patrice Pavis, professor for Theatre Studies at the University of Kent in Canterbury, England, who has written extensively about performance

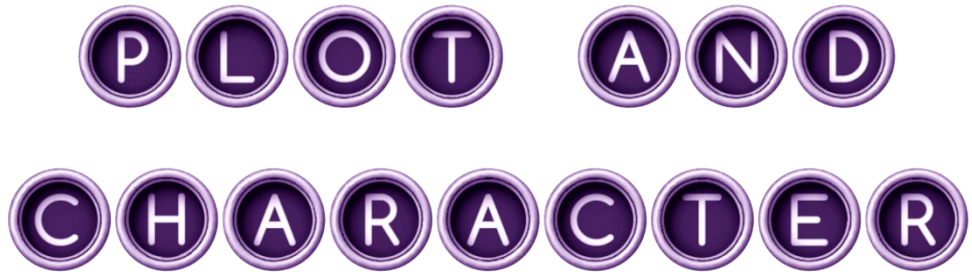
"Plot is people. Human emotions and desires founded on the realities of life, working at cross purposes, getting hotter and fiercer as they strike against each other until finally there's an explosion – that's Plot.
Leigh Brackett, American science fiction writer known as 'The Queen of Space Opera'

"RELATIVELY SPEAKING… with this type of 'clockwork' play – almost entirely plot-driven – once you've wound up the first act, the second act is to some extent easier as the spring is allowed to unwind again. Character in this instance is particularly dictated by the requirements of the plot."
Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING









The Making of Character: The Basic Building Blocks

"Writers have frequently been quoted as saying, 'The story wrote itself.' Or, 'The characters led – I followed.' But that would not have been possible if the right characters had not first been developed."
Edward Dmytryk, ON SCREEN WRITING

The Basics

The basic building blocks to make a character are fairly obvious. There's age, name, sex, physical appearance, educational background, current relationships, romantic history, moral values, religious beliefs, occupation, hobbies, philosophical outlook, political views, state of health, intelligence and a whole host of other character elements. Then there are the character's dominant traits and attributes. Are they shy, feisty, easy to anger, motherly, controlling, wayward, patronising, vain? And what do they sound like when they speak? Loud, quiet, whispery, thunderous? Do they communicate in grammatically correct English or is their speech more towards slang, jargon or even the cryptic? And does your

character have leitmotif or trademark catchphrases such as ‘I’ll be back’ or ‘Make my day’?

Many writing courses suggest that creating a character from these lists and questions can be a good starting point. However, for many writers such a way of working would be seen as little more that a parlour game, for many writers already have in their head a clear idea of who and what their characters are. Characters are about essence not lists. For many it’s almost as if a character somehow created themselves in the mind of the writer without them even knowing about it. However, there are other writers who prefer to let the actions of the character become what the character is and how they should be seen and understood.

“I often talk about my characters writing themselves. I have the spark of an idea for one and through the act of writing they become flesh and blood. Barrington [in MR LOVERMAN] was the perfect example of this. I feel that he wrote himself into being, and then proceeded to write his story for me.”
Bernardine Evaristo MANIFESTO ON NEVER GIVING UP

“Three-dimensional characters… The first dimension is their story. The second dimension is their breadth: in other words, those surface characteristics (appearance, habits, attitudes) or other personal qualities that they themselves make immediately apparent. And finally, there’s depth of a character: that crucial essence that is revealed in them as the story and unwinds and the pressure builds up.”
Stephen Jeffreys, PLAYWRITING: STRUCTURE, CHARACTER, HOW AND WHAT TO WRITE

PHINEAS NIGELLUS: You know, Minister, I disagree with Dumbledore on many counts...but you cannot deny he's got style..."
From J.K. Rowling's HARRY POTTER AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX



"We must distinguish between characteristics and passing emotions. To be furious is not a characteristic, but a passing emotion."
Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

Character Notes

If we examine our own lives and ask how we got to where we are, it's unlikely that we could pin down a single cause, event or even reason. And if this is true in life, why does it happen so much in stories? Why is it that so often dramas oversimplify psychological motivation? As Robert McKee points out, the more a story nails motivation down to a specific or single cause, the more that character and that story is diminished. That said, it can be useful to think about character in terms of past, present and future, meaning who they were, who they are and who they want to be.

But it's right to be wary of single traits. Instead, look for the contradictions and the conflicts. Hamlet is both impetuous and

indecisive. Cruel and compassionate. Macbeth is murderous, yet filled with guilt. Coriolanus is a fierce warrior in war, but a useless diplomat when there's peace. And if your character has traits that are less than sympathetic then give them attributes that make them are attractive. We learn, for example, to admire Richard the Third's cunning and scheming even though we may not like the idea of sending children to the Tower to be murdered or instructing henchmen to drown a relative in barrel of wine.



Another way to make wicked characters more sympathetic is to surround them by characters even more unpleasant. Hannibal Lecter is one of the wickedest characters in modern fiction, yet he's also well-mannered, intelligent, loyal and honest. And the point here is that one-to-one Lecter in many ways is far more likable than his jailor psychologist, who is humourless, stupid and in his own way very cruel.

On the other hand, if your character is too perfect, give them a flaw, as in Achilles and his heel, for most of us have something missing in our character that makes us incomplete or out of balance.

Remember too that a character is allowed passing emotions. A person can be furious without, by nature, being a person whose dial is set at 'Permanent Anger'.

"Characters who are unpredictable will also be inconsistent, just as characters who are consistent will be predictable. And in this set of words, we find the crux of the problem of characterisation. The key for the playwright is to navigate between the two."
Stephen Jeffreys, PLAYWRITING: STRUCTURE, CHARACTER, HOW AND WHAT TO WRITE



"The Seven Deadly Sins are all present in comedy."
Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

Shortcuts to Character

Ben Johnson had his humours as his method of building a character, plus a few animal traits thrown in. Then there are the ancient Greeks and what they thought everything was made up of, namely Earth, Fire, Air and Water. Not forgetting, of course, the Ten Commandments, which have always been a good starting point for finding flaws in characters. And you could add, as Jonathan Lynn suggests in his book COMEDY RULES, a couple of the Seven Deadly Sins, which offer ways to create both character and action especially in farce and comedy.

Another character shortcut is give a character a vocabulary that reflects their job or interest. The weekend sailor, maybe, who constantly uses navel expressions even when at home or in the office. An example of this is the advertising man (the 12th Juror) in 12 ANGRY MEN – "Um, if no-one else has an idea, I may have a cutie here. I mean, I haven't put much thought into it. Anyway, lemme throw it out on the stop and see if the cat licks it up." In a jury room advertising jargon appears inappropriate and out of place, and indeed it is, but it's flippant use in what is a trial for murder tells you much about the man's superficiality and attitude to the case.

"It is true that one of the pleasures afforded by good books is the writer's fine handling of language. But the dazzling poetry of Mercutio's Queen Mab speech is not the same poetry Hamlet speaks, while Hamlet's murderer- stepfather Claudius favours dull pentameters. Shakespeare fits language to its speaker and occasion, as the best writers always do. Both Hamlet and Mercutio are in some sense unbalanced, but the difference between the two kinds of imbalance is marked. Mercutio's madness is fantastic and phantasmic; Hamlet's is the madness of diseased irony and constraint…. However splendid it may be, Shakespeare's language is finally subservient to character and plot."

John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)



"'Oh, there you are, Albus,' he said. 'You've been a very long time. Upset stomach?'
'No, I was merely reading the Muggle magazines,' said Dumbledore. 'I do love knitting patterns.'"
From HARRY POTTER AND THE HALF-BLOOD Prince J.K. Rowling

Traits and Habits

Although it's wise to avoid basing a character on a single trait, attitude or habit occasionally they can tell you a lot about a character. Take Dumbledore's hobby of and love for Muggle knitting patterns. There's a scene which takes place in 1976 in the Muggle-owned house in Budleigh Babberton where Horace Slughorn has been hiding. Dumbledore asks Horace if he can borrow the copy of *Knitter's Own* as he's a fan of knitting patterns. Why would this be? Well, in a way, a knitting pattern is like a spell. It's carefully written code produces, almost like magic, a lovely woolly jumper simply from lines of yarn. Plus, as it's a Muggle invention, it shows Dumbledore's fondness for us human beings. It's a throw-away line in a way, and seemingly very unwizard-like, but in its own way tells you all you really need to know about Dumbledore.

"I think Chewbacca is French because he understands English but he refuses to speak it."
Sameer Katz, comedian



"Some of our greatest writers have used the smallest of details to reveal the deepest characterisations."
Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

The 'Tip-of-the-iceberg' Line

Writers, and playwrights and screenwriters in particular, often talk about what they call the 'tip-of-the-iceberg' line. What this means is a line in a script that appears to be hardly anything at all, yet in context tells you much about a character and what lies under the surface. The 'tip-of-the-iceberg' works in a similar way to subtext, which Vicky neatly sums up in Noël Coward's SHADOW PLAY as "Small talk – a lot of small talk with quite different thoughts going on behind it". Except the 'tip-of-the-iceberg' line tends to be singular in nature. In the movie LIVING, for example, there's a scene where a repressed Englishman in 1953 goes to the doctor after undergoing medical tests. The doctor indicates that he knows the results and it's bad news, but such thing are always difficult. The Englishman, Mr Williams played by Bill Nighy, simply says "Quite." That's it. Yet that's all he needed to say, for that monosyllabic 'quite' tells you everything you need to know about him, his background and even the medical conclusions themselves.

On a more positive note there is this exchange between Harry Potter and Professor McGonagall from HARRY POTTER AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX. It's often quoted by fans of the *Harry Potter* series as a particular favourite precisely because of the final line which tells you what Professor McGonagall thinks of Professor Umbridge and Harry's Potter's seeming insolence:

> "Is it true that you shouted at Professor Umbridge?"
> "Yes."
> "You called her a liar?"
> "Yes."
> "You told her He Who Must Not Be Named is back?"
> "Yes."
> "Have a biscuit, Potter."

"A great many of Dickens's characters were also Johnny One-Note. Yet, what notes! Besides, one did not read at that time to explore into character in the way we feel is necessary today."
Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART



"The writer must be not only capable of understanding people different from himself but fascinated by such people. He must have sufficient self-esteem that he is not threatened by difference, and sufficient warmth and sympathy, and a sufficient concern with fairness, that he wants to value people different from himself, and finally he must have, I think, sufficient faith in the goodness of life

that he can not only tolerate but celebrate a world of differences, conflicts, oppositions."
John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

Psychological Connection

The writer sits in silence at a meeting at his publisher's office or perhaps at a table alongside powerful Hollywood producers. Those in the room then fire suggestions at him about his script and the main character –

"Your central character is… well, not that pleasant."

"Could you make him more likable? Humanise him a bit."

"How about we have a scene where he's playing with a dog? Or he saves a cat that's got stuck up a tree?"

"Or better still, a monologue where he tells us how the pet he loved died when he was six."

"If not his pet, then how about his mother?"

"Yes, an orphanage flashback."

"You see, if you did all that we might care for him a bit more."

The problem, as the advisers see it, is that the writer has not written a 'likable' character. The writer's problem is the whole point of the story is that this character isn't nice or likeable. So what does the writer do? Add the dead kitten scene? A grainy flashback of a lonely boy eating gruel? Or does he simply say, "My character is what he is. And what he is you will find somewhere in all of us."



The point is that, ultimately, what counts with a character is being able to make some sort of psychological connection. The character doesn't have to be nice, or even likable, for we are all a bundle of desires, wants and needs, with traits good and bad. Some the things we do will be positive for ourselves and those around us, others will be negative actions that we, perhaps unknowingly, mete out to our friends and family. We are many people and one of those people is somewhere in the character the writer has created. Empathy is good, liking is great, but what matters most is making that psychological connection. And if there is truth in the character, no matter how unpleasant, then it's always possible to make that connection. Understand that and you understand what character is and what character can be.

"I really fall in love with my characters, even the bad ones. I love getting together with them. They tell me what to do; they take me on a wild and wonderful trip."
Jackie Collins



"There's a reason Hergé's Tintin has absolutely no discernible character while he's surrounded by an extraordinarily rich gallery of archetypes – how easy it is for a child to step into his plus fours and become the hero of the adventure, for the character is so like himself."

John Yorke, INTO THE WOODS

The Blank Canvas

John Yorke's observation about Tintin having no discernable character could, to some degree, also apply to one Harry Potter. In fact, many lead characters in children's fiction are what you may call a *tabula rasa* or 'blank slate', to borrow John Locke's philosophical phrase, and in the process of taking in the story, the young reader subconsciously projects themselves into the action onto that open canvas to 'become' Harry or Tintin or indeed William in the *Swidgers* Time Adventure book series.

But the idea of the *tabula rasa* goes beyond children's literature. The concept of the blank character, for example, is explored in a very literal way in Woody Allen's film ZELIG (1983). Set in the 1920s and 1930s, this mockumentary movie concerns one Leonard Zelig (Woody Allen), a nondescript man who has the ability to transform his appearance into that of the people who surround

him. A less literal version of Zelig could be said to be the character of Forrest Gump in FORREST GUMP (1994), who adapts, to some degree, to the different worlds he finds himself in. A modern Gulliver, you might say. And then there's Chauncey Gardiner, known as Chance, the middle-aged, simple-minded gardener, who, by chance, finds himself advisor to the President of the United States. In essence, those around Chauncey Gardiner project their own needs onto him when Chance's gardening tips are misinterpreted as metaphors for optimistic political wisdom.

David Mamet in his writing talks a lot about what he calls 'inflection'. And he doesn't like it. Mamet argues in ON DIRECTING FILM that when it comes to character, less is more: "the less inflected a character is the better: the less the Hero of the play is inflected, identified, and characterised, the more we will endow him with our own internal meaning – the more we will identify with him – which is to say the more we will be assured that we are that Hero."

Some more thoughts on the idea of the blank canvas…

"Working for the radio, I learned the way all great dramas works: by leaving the endowment of characters, place, and especially action up to the audience. Only by eschewing the desire to characterise can one begin to understand the model of the perfect play."

David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

'White. A blank page or canvas. So many possibilities.'
George in Stephen Sondheim's SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE



"Fate is a funny character. She puts obstacles in your path to see what character you have. Life isn't fair, life is a test."
Melissa Francis, American television news personality

The Four Levels of Conflict

There are those who argue that character is built from action where action is required where there is conflict and that conflict comes from the forces of antagonism. There are essentially four levels of conflict: inner, personal, extraneous and cosmic. They can be broken down and split up into further categories, but these four are the basic forces of potential antagonism.



Inner conflicts are internal tensions within oneself. Think here of those Shakespearean characters who, in their soliloquies, question themselves. Hamlet does so about his own inadequacies, inactions,

and even the purpose of life itself. And Macbeth is haunted by feelings of guilt and remorse as a result of letting ambition get the better of him.



Personal conflicts concern our relationships with others. The Eternal Family Triangle of son/daughter-father-mother is a classic. It's fathers and sons in FIELD OF DREAMS, PINNOCHIO, STAR WARS and LION KING, mothers and daughters in BRAVE, POSTCARDS FROM

THE EDGE, GYPSY and MOMMIE DEAREST, sons and mothers in PSYCHO, LION, DUMBO, SOUL and THE FURIES, and daughters and fathers in ELECTRA, YENTL, BEAUTY AND THE BEAST and THE LITTLE MERMAID. Disney, as can be seen, is big on the Eternal Family Triangle, as were the Greeks.

Extraneous conflict can range from the natural disasters and the elements, to organisations and political pressures. The political enemy, for example, in ROB ROY, BRAVEHEART, MICHAEL COLLINS, THE CRYING GAMES, GHANDI, THE NAME OF THE FATHER, THE PATRIOT and THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY are the English or the British. The Empire is getting its comeuppance at last.

Finally there is cosmic conflict, which often features in mythological stories. Oedipus in the Greek myths is fighting Fate (or *Ananke*), but for the Greeks this was an impossible task, for even top god Zeus was never a match for *Ananke*. And cosmic forces, and to some degree Fate, are there as well in the *Star Wars* series. There are those who argue that the subconscious appeal of *Star Wars* to a generation who have little religious belief in their lives is a sense and need of the cosmic that is at least part of what it is to be human.

Building a character from the story's action conflict may seem a bit back-to-front and may not suit all writers. Yet it's useful to bear in mind these levels conflicts when considering how a character is put together in terms of flaws, strengths and weaknesses, as they are likely to come into play in the tale's action.

One final word of conflict. Remember the Newtonian 'Irresistible Force' paradox (also 'Unstoppable Force' paradox or the 'Shield and Spear' paradox) where the question is 'What happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object?' Well, from a story pint of view the simple answer is drama, for, as both the immovable object and the unstoppable force are assumed to be indestructible, one of them will have to give way or buckle. Find that unstoppable force and that immovable object in your story and conflict and dramas will naturally follow. It all sounds a bit crude but one it's a principle that could lead to quite an adventure.

Some more thoughts on dramatic conflict…

"The true drama, and especially the tragedy, calls for the Hero to exercise will, to create, in front of us, on the stage, his or her own character, the strength to continue. It is her striving to understand, to correctly assess, to face up her own character (in her choice of battles) that inspires us – and gives the drama the power to cleanse and enrich our own character. This is the struggle."
David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE

"I worship at the altar of intention and obstacle. Somebody wants something, and something is standing in their way of getting it. They want the money, they want the girl, they want to get to Philadelphia. Then the obstacle to that has to be formidable, and the tactics they use to overcome that obstacle are what shows us the character."
Aaron Sorkin, screenwriter

"In 1979, an unstoppable force met an immovable object. Chuck Norris kicked Mr. T in the jaw. The result was the 80s."
Chuck Norris, American martial artist and actor

"'I wish stories were kinder to their characters,' Maddie said. 'But I guess trouble is more interesting to read about.'"
Shannon Hale, author of A WONDERLANDIFUL WORLD

"Be a sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them — in order that the reader may see what they are made of."
Kurt Vonnegut, from the preface of BAGOMBO SNUFF BOX



"It is sometimes the minor, not the major, characters in a novel who hold the author's affection longest. It may be that one loses affection for the major characters because they suck off so much energy as one pushes them through their lives."
Larry McMurtry, ROADS: DRIVING AMERICA'S GREAT HIGHWAYS

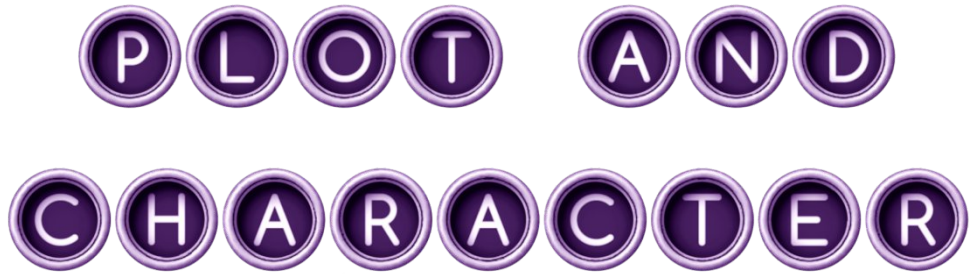
Supporting Characters

There's an old theatre joke about two Elizabethan actors where one of them has just been offered a role in a new William Shakespeare tragedy. "What's the plot of the play?" asks the friend. "Well," replies the actor, "it's about this gravedigger."

Yes, it's a joke about the self-centred nature of the actor but also what we have here is the old adage that all characters are the hero of their own story. And, of course, the theatre maxim that for the actor there is no such thing as a small part. It may be a 'Cough and a spit', as actors call small roles in plays or films, but at least make it a good cough and a spit so that it will have an impact and be remember. All that said, don't make your supporting characters so interesting and entertaining that they overshadow your hero. Your tale will end up in serious trouble if the side-kick begins to outshine your protagonist.

HAMLET: And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them; for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too.
From Shakespeare's HAMLET





The Making of Character: Social Status, Duality and Interaction

"Upon that second reading, much of the book fell away in my mind revealing a story that was a metaphor for American capitalism in the tale of a great king with three sons: the oldest was given his passion and aggressiveness, the second his sweet nature and childlike qualities, and the third his intelligence, cunning, and coldness."
Francis Ford Coppola, THE GODFATHER NOTEBOOK

Social Status

Traditionally the status of a character has been important drama. What we're talking about here is the concept of 'the net thrower' in tragedy. The 'net' is the image that shows how the actions and decisions of one character can affects the lives of many. King Lear's foolishness, for example, leads eventually to civil war and a stage full of corpses. This is not quite the same with Willy Loman in DEATH OF A SALESMAN but the point here is that Loman is an

Everyman character. And we can see millions like him in that one man.

"'I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person.'"
Said by Linda Loman about her husband Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's DEATH OF A SALESMAN



"The same distinction marks off Tragedy from Comedy; for Comedy aims at representing men as worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life."
Aristotle, POETICS

Tragic and Comic Characters

If drama can be summed up as 'change through conflict' then a capacity to change is key and must somehow be part of a character. Yet, in tragedy, characters often can't change their nature, or worse they consciously refuse to change, and that is part of their tragedy. And comic characters by their natures tend to be unchanging too because, as Henri Bergson argued in his treatise LAUGHTER, a comic persona depends on "inelasticity of character". In other words,

whatever situation a comic character finds themselves in, they will behave in the same way. And that's what makes them and those scenes so funny. Think here of Toad in WIND IN THE WILLOWS. He says he's learnt his lesson but he hasn't. And so a whole new comic adventure begins.

Of course, a character's fortune and fate can change. Circumstances and events can bring about a realisation about a character's true situation or even nature. And that was Aristotle's point in his POETICS.

Some more thoughts on tragic and comic characters…

"The truly tragic kind of suffering is the kind produced and defiantly insisted upon by the hero himself so that, instead of making him better, it makes him worse and when he dies he is not reconciled to the law but defiant, that is, damned. Lear is not a tragic hero, Othello is."
W. H. Auden, author

"The tragic hero prefers death to prudence. The comedian prefers playing tricks to winning. Only the villain really plays to win."
Mason Cooley, professor emeritus of French, speech and world literature at the College of Staten Island.

TOAD: Glorious, stirring sight! The poetry of motion! The real way to travel! The only way to travel! Here today—in next week tomorrow! Villages skipped, towns and cities jumped—always somebody else's horizon! O bliss! O poop-poop! O my! O my!
From WIND IN THE WILLOWS by Kenneth Grahame

"Leading characters in comedy should not know they are funny. This should be Rule 1 for actors. The actor has to know, of course – but the character must not."
Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

"Tragic heroes always moan when the gods take an interest in them, but it's the people the gods ignore who get the really tough deals."
Terry Pratchett

"Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness."
Henri Bergson, philosopher and writer



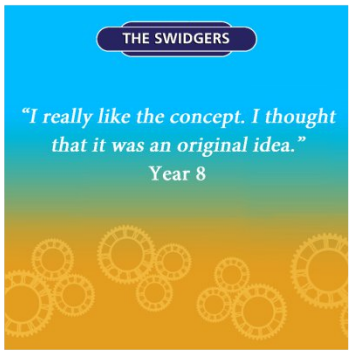
"You see this smile, Betty? It's not really a smile. It's a lid on a scream."
Bet Lynch in CORONATION STREET

Character Duality

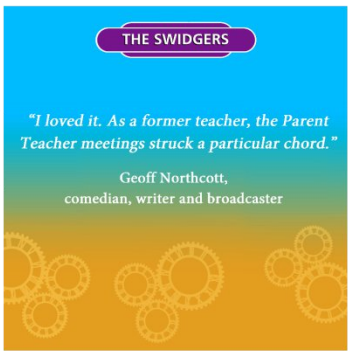
Find, as the saying goes, 'the mountain in the well' – the discover the humility in the greatness and the vigour in the weakness.

We saw in looking at the antagonist that that they are so often the shadow or mirror opposite of the hero. But that opposition can

be internal too. Yes, the Batman and the Joker are neatly balanced against each other and that drives the action, but it's the tension between Bruce Wayne and his alter ego Batman that is at the psychological heart of those stories.







Dualities of course abound in mythology, for example, the werewolf legend, Loki in Norse mythology, Ometeotl in the Aztec world, plus we now have those stories which explore the idea of two in one in a modern form such as Robert Louis Stevenson's DOCTOR JEKYLL AND MR HYDE. And duality is a popular story trope in science fiction, notably in such STAR TREK stories as *Mirror, Mirror* and *Let That Be Your Last Battlefield* and *Turnabout Intruder*.

And there is of course often a moral aspect to our inner duality. As the theologian and philosopher Saint Paul observed in ROMANS 7:79 "For the good that I would do, I do no; but the evil which I would not, that I do." Our best intentions are not always our best endeavours. In a way you could say that all drama lies in the gap between who we are and who we would like to be. Between what we believe we desire and what we discover we truly need to be. The

gap between what we have and what would like to have. As W.B. Yeats observed, “Out of quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of quarrel with ourselves we make poetry.” And from that a terrible beauty is born. No wonder so many story gurus put so much emphasis on internal oppositions and the conflicting inner dynamics of a character.

Characters – and that means all of us – sometimes behave in ways they themselves would disapprove of and when writers explore this notion it allows us to see people and ourselves in a new light. There’s a very perceptive line in Oliver Stone’s NIXON where Richard Nixon observes of John F. Kennedy, “When they look at you, they see what they want to be. When they look at me, they see what they are.”

Here are a few dualities explored in stories:

Child – Adult.

Reality – Façade.

Head – Heart.

Id – Super Ego.

Laughter – Tears.

Animus – Anima.

Art – Science,

Body – Soul.

Blind – Seeing.

Order –Chaos.

Apollonian – Dionysian.

Big – Small.

Right Brain – Left Brain.

Tensions of opposites. And in no particular order now match up the duality with the story it explored:

TOM AND JERRY – *Dr Jekyll and Mr Mouse*.

OEDIPUS REX.

PETER PAN.

Pirandello's HENRY IV.

BIG.

THE MASTERS.

YENTL.

EQUUS.

THE BACCHAE.

THE LORD OF THE FLIES.

AMADEUS.

TWELFTH NIGHT.

PAGLIACCI.

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH.

HAMLET.

Perhaps HAMLET is a bit of a cheat because Hamlet is one of the most conflicted and ill-balanced characters in drama. As he says himself "Blest are those / Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled / That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger." Yet

Hamlet is not so well balanced with courage and good judgement. His conflicts fight each other rather than work together producing inaction and doubt.

Writers and actors know that conflicts lead to neurosis and coping mechanisms. Nervous tics, stuttering, excessive blinking that reveal the secrets you don't even know you're keeping.

The Soviet supremo Joseph Stalin loved American Westerns, the philosopher Bertrand Russell devoured cheap detective fiction. People are full of apparent contradictions. People who like to take charge in their life are often the same people who only walk on paving stones without a crack in them or hang around for the second magpie to appear when they see one alone, thus, bizarrely, letting superstition take control of how they behave. But why would a person do this? And why was it that Stalin liked Westerns and Russell read cheap fiction? Well, the answer's in that person's psychology. And the answer may be fascinating. The advantage the writer has is that once they have found the contradiction or the duality they are able to invent reasons for themselves. And that's how you make characters.

Some more thoughts on duality…

"Very few of us are what we seem."
Agatha Christie

"My life is black and white and mixed. My mother's a Rastafarian, my dad was a short white guy – it's not an affectation. It's also the lives of millions of people throughout the world."
Zadie Smith

"At that moment we're feeling most saintly, we may in fact be evil. And that moment when we think we're most evil and finally corrupt, we might, by the startling judgements of God, be considered saintly."
Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

"A character on screen that's the 'good guy' or the 'bad guy,' they're never interesting. There's got to be an internal struggle, the duality is important to find."
Bill Skaragard



"You create a bunch of characters and let them start bouncing into one another. That's how a good story happens."
Dennis Lehane

Y = (C–1) × C

There's an old adage in theatre that acting isn't really about but about *re-acting*. What matters as an actor is how you respond to the wants and actions of the other characters. And the same could be said to some extent to creating and writing a character: what matters is how each character reacts and interacts with the others. And there's even an equation for the number of possible interactions

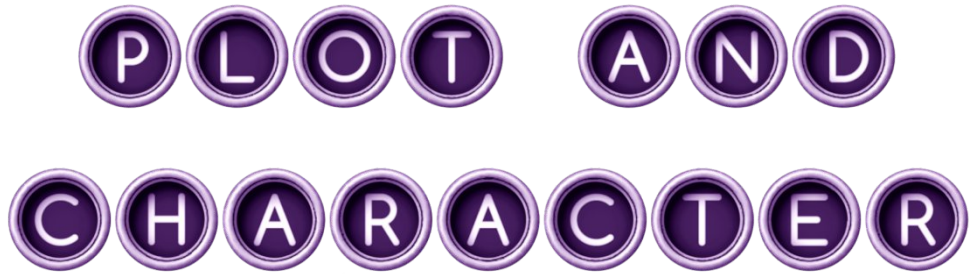
[Y = *(C–1) × C*] where *C* is the number of characters in a story and *Y* is the number of potential relationships or interactions of those characters (assuming, of course, it is possible for them to meet).

Two characters then results in two relationships, A to B and B to A. But make it three characters and suddenly there are six dynamics: A to B, B to A, C to A, C to B, B to C and A to C. Think, for example, how adding the dog Butch to TOM AND JERRY completely changes things in the battle of Tom and Jerry.

"Think of your main characters as dinner guests. Would your friends want to spend ten hours with the characters you've created? Your characters can be loveable, or they can be evil, but they'd better be compelling."

Po Bronson, American journalist and author





The Making of Character: Basing Characters on Real People and Yourself

"People go to the cinema to see themselves on the screen. As an actor, people must identify with you. You cannot hold up a picture and say, 'This is me,' you hold up a mirror and say 'This is you.'"
Michael Caine

The Making of Characters

One curious aspect about the idea of 'making a character' is that we are one. Unless we're creating a creature that isn't a human being, then we have a model right there in front of us, if we choose to look in a mirror, and inside of us, if choose to examine our own minds. is we decide to use our minds. And even if we are inventing an alien creature, we often simply exaggerate to the extreme those aspects, both good and bad, that we see in and feel in ourselves and, of course, those people around us, who, in some ways, are always alien to us.

"Eighty-five percent of whoever you play is identical to the character, whoever it is, man, woman or child. It's the fifteen percent that you have to find, isolate and act, so to speak."
Jack Nicholson, actor



"It's not a good idea to try to put your wife in your novel."
Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

Basing Characters on Real People

In the late 1840s, Charles Dickens began writing an autobiography and he gave the early chapters to his friend and future biographer, John Forster. Dickens though found writing about his childhood emotionally very difficult and ultimately burnt what he had written. Instead, Charles Dickens wrote a fictionalised novel based on his own life and those he had known and he called the hero of this tale 'David Copperfield'. Note the inversion of the initial letters of the two names – CD and DC. In the preface to the 1867 edition, Dickens wrote: "like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is David Copperfield." Not surprising that, for David Copperfield essentially is Charles Dickens.

Dickens' tale – the full title of which is THE PERSONAL HISTORY, ADVENTURES, EXPERIENCE AND OBSERVATION OF DAVID

COPPERFIELD THE YOUNGER OF BLUNDERSTONE ROOKERY (WHICH HE NEVER MEANT TO PUBLISH ON ANY ACCOUNT) – displays a remarkable ability to make the reader see through the eyes of another mind. Especially a young mind, for the early childhood sections truly capture the thinking of an abandoned, and then rescued, child. And the teenager's first experience of wine and inebriation is a joy to behold, as David's description of his night out brilliantly captures the bonhomie and unsteady legs of a young man who has had a little too much to drink.



The whole book, full of what we would now call Dickensian characters, has a feeling of authenticity and truth. Well, most of it is based on reality. And that includes Dickens' love life. David's first wife, Dora Spenlow, is almost certainly based upon Maria Beadnell, whom Dickens loved in his early youth. Charles Dickens' actual wife, Catherine Thomson "Kate" Dickens (née Hogarth), when young was a pretty girl but she became fat and Dickens grew to dislike her. Oddly enough, Dickens kills off David Copperfield's wife Dora and that allows him to marry Agnes Wickfield, who, it is thought, is based on

Dickens' sisters-in-law Mary Georgina Hogarth and Georgina Hogarth, both of whom lived with Dickens and his wife Catherine. Freud's idea of 'wish fulfilment' in dreams and fantasy may be a twentieth century concept, but it's not difficult to see that some sort of fantasy wishing is going on in the Dora and Agnus plot. And it's not that pleasant, either.



There are in fact many autobiographical incidents and characters throughout the whole of DAVID COPPERFIELD. Dickens is known to have felt deprived of an education during his time at Warren's Blacking Factory when his father was in prison for debt and these feelings manifest themselves in David's description of Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse. And the ever present financial troubles of the Micawbers are thought to mirror those of Dickens' parents, John and Elizabeth Dickens. When, for example, David is asked by Mrs Micawber to take some much loved possessions to the pawn shop to help meet debts, Dickens is probably recalling painful memories of having to pawn off books he had treasured as a child to help with John Dickens' financially precarious predicament. But it was, of course, only after Dickens' death, and the publication of John Forster's THE LIFE OF CHARLES DICKENS, that anyone really knew anything about Dickens' early struggles and how they shaped his fiction.

Many novels and plays and movies are thinly disguised autobiographies. At the bestseller end, there's Andy McNab's 1993 book BRAVO TWO ZERO, which is about a military mission in which McNab himself had taken part in when with the Special Air Service (SAS) during the Persian Gulf War. A sort of poetic reality can be found in Terence Davies' autobiographical movies about his childhood in Liverpool, DISTANT VOICES, STILL LIVES (1988) and THE LONG DAY CLOSES (1992). As for stage plays, there's Arnold Wesker's

1957 drama THE KITCHEN, based on the time Wesker was working at the Bell Hotel in Norwich, plus Wesker's autobiographical CHICKEN SOUP WITH BARLEY (1956), spanning twenty years of the lives of an immigrant Jewish family, starting in 1936 going right up to what would have been the present day. The mother in CHICKEN SOUP WITH BARLEY, Sarah, an ardent socialist, is thought to have been based on Arnold Wesker's aunt, Sarah Wesker, who was a trade union activist in the East End of London. In the play all the family are communists who struggle to maintain their idealistic convictions in the face of the Second World War, the tyranny of Stalinism, and the Soviet repression of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution.

"The ego is as you think of yourself. You in relation to all the commitments of your life, as you understand them. The self is the whole range of possibilities that you've never even thought of. And you're stuck with your past when you're stuck with the ego. Because if all you know about yourself is what you found out about yourself, well, that already happened. The self is a whole field of potentialities to come through."

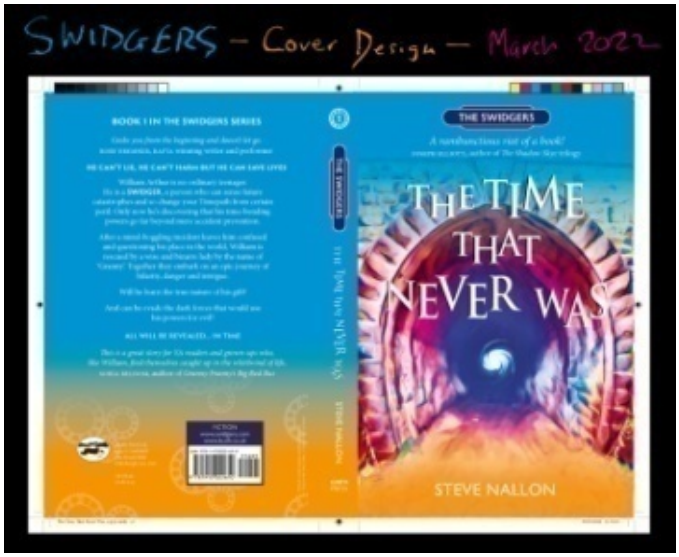
Joseph Campbell, author of THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES



"I write about real people in disguise. If anything, my characters are toned down-the truth is much more bizarre."
Jackie Collins

Taking the Real and Making it Fiction

So what's the best way to take a real character and make them fictional? One obvious method is to combine people. Mix and match, as they say, by taking perhaps the physical attributes from one and adding them to the psychological nature of another. Or edit down. If drama is real life with the boring bits cut out, then do the same with people. Just lose the parts that aren't that interesting. Another way is to somehow distil the essence of someone and keep that quintessential spirit in your head as you are writing. Find the kernel of the character and let them come alive in your head and in your story.



One of the most interesting methods of taking someone real and making them fictional comes from what you might consider an unlikely source. And that is Jackie Collins. Morton Janklow, literary agent to Jackie Collins, always said that "The great storyteller is rarer than the great writer." And, he admitted, Jackie Collins may not be a greatest writer in the world but she was a fabulous storyteller and creator of characters. When her bestseller HOLLYWOOD WIVES first came out, naturally enough everyone wanted to know who all the characters were based on. Except taking a real life figures and putting them on the page was not exactly how Jackie Collins worked. What Collins did was observe quirks in people – they way they interacted with others, their manners to waiters, their attitude to their spouses – and then, after noting these, Collins would come up with her own psychological reasoning as to why they behaved as they did. Why was that famous actor so rude to those who served him drinks? How had that nervous tick in the right eye of that producer developed? What was behind that director's belittling of his wife? Collins created characters, as an actor would say, from the outside in.

But be warned. Real people, being real, can sue. And Charles Dickens came a cropper when he introduced the character of the dwarf, Miss Mowcher, as an aid to Steerforth's plan to elope with Emily, in DAVID COPPERFIELD. Mrs Jane Seymour Hill, Dickens' wife Catherine's chiropodist, recognised herself as 'Miss Mowcher', and

immediately threatened a lawsuit. Luckily this was in an era when books were often first published in weekly or monthly instalments, and as DAVID COPPERFIELD was published monthly, Dickens was able to change the nature of the character in her next appearance in a later instalment and 'Miss Mowcher' became a far more sympathetic character, who in fact deplores Steerforth's actions.



Some more thoughts on creating characters based on yourself and real people…

"The characters in my novels are my own unrealised possibilities. That is why I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented."
Milan Kundera, novelist

"I have this theory that people in Hollywood don't read. They read* Vanity Fair *and then consider themselves terribly well read. I think I can basically write about anybody without getting caught."
Jackie Collins, novelist

"I realised that if I was going to assume the responsibility of writing about my home, I needed narrative ruthlessness. I couldn't dull the

edges and fall in love with my characters and spare them. Life does not spare us."
Jesmyn Ward, SALVAGE THE BONES

"When people say to me, 'What do you do?' I say, 'I tell stories from my life.' They say, 'You must have a very interesting life.' 'No,' I say. 'But I tell it well.'"
Spalding Gray, actor and writer

"My characters are quite as real to me as so-called real people; which is one reason why I'm not subject to what is known as loneliness. I have plenty of company."
William S. Burroughs, writer

"You can write about any character but one – the novelist more talented than yourself."
Jean Malaquais, Polish-born novelist who settled in Franace

"You can base characters on people you know – they seldom if ever recognise themselves in the fictional script."
Jonathan Lynn, COMEDY RULES

"When writing, I model all the heroes after myself. Of course, it's hard to make them quite as wonderful as I am, but I come as close as I can."
Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

"Some of my characters do come from real people. One might emerge out of five individuals, another from one person, greatly altered. Still another is imagined. No matter by which route, there's pleasure when a character becomes, in a sense, independent of yourself."
Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

"I wouldn't write about people who are living and who are close to me, because I think it's a very violent thing to do to another person. And anytime I have done it, even in the disguise of fiction, the results have been horrific."
Zadie Smith, writer and novelist

"A story tells about men and their doings. Some people are more interested in 'men' – that is, human characterisation – while others are more interested in their 'doings' – that is, in their actions. Some novelists are satisfied when they have given a complete description of a character in a few hundred pages of a novel. Some picture produces are solely interested in action and despise characterisation as 'psychological stuff'. Both elements, however, are necessary for the motion picture story."
Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

"Creating characters is like throwing together ingredients for a recipe. I take characteristics I like and dislike in real people I know, or know of, and use them to embellish and define characters."
Cassandra Clare, pen name of Judith Lewis, American author of young adult fiction, including the series THE MORTAL INSTRUMENTS

"It is my considered view that no one can invent fictional characters without first having made a lengthy study of people, just as it is impossible for anyone to speak a language that has not been properly mastered."
Alexandre Dumas fils, LA DAME AUX CAMÉLIAS

"I think I'm a born storyteller. Inspiration is all around me. I can read a newspaper article and come up with an idea for a book."
Jackie Collins

"Readers often have a problem when an author mixes real and fictional characters. I've never been bothered by that. As far as I'm concerned, it's all fiction."
Norman Mailer, THE SPOOKY ART

"The characters who go to make up my stories and novels are not portraits. Characters I invent along with the story that carries them. Attached to them are what I've borrowed, perhaps unconsciously, bit by bit, of persons I have seen or noticed or remembered in the flesh – a cast of countenance here, a manner of walking there, that jumps to the visualising mind when a story is under way. I don't write by invasion into the life of a real person: my own sense of privacy is too strong for that; and I also know instinctively that living people to whom you are close – those known to you in ways too deep, too overflowing, ever to be plumbed outside love – do not yield to, could never fit into, the demands of a story. Characters take on life sometimes by luck, but I suspect it is when you can write most entirely out of yourself, that a character becomes in its own right another human being on the page."
Eudora Welty, ON WRITING

"One of the most-common mistakes that beginning writers make is leaving their characters alone. Writing, you may be alone. Reading, your audience may be alone. But your character should spend very, very little time alone. Because a solitary character starts thinking or worrying or wondering."
Chuck Palahniuk

"By 'character' I mean here what is sometimes called the individual's 'inscribed' nature, his innate self; by 'personality' I mean the sum of his typical and habitual ways of relating to those around him."
John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

"People are intrigued by fame, power and wealth and I think Hollywood is the only place where you get all three together."
Jackie Collins





Granny in THE SWIDGERS

In THE TIME THEY SAVED TOMORROW, book two of the SWIDGERS series, Alicia says that whenever Granny touches someone with her hands, "a little bit of them becomes a little bit of her". And in a way, that's how writers are too, for real people become absorbed into their psyche and then, somehow, find their way into the writer's creative world.



And Granny in SWIDGERS is made up from the bizarre coterie of aunts and grandmas. It was Auntie Janie (*far left*), or more

precisely, Great Aunt Jane, who most influenced how Granny looks and speaks. Janie always spoke ten-to-the-dozen and much of what she said was more or less what she had just said anyway but with the words in a different order. That's not quite Granny but Janie's joyful giddiness certainly doers have strong echoes in Granny's character. And it's certainly Janie's ginger hair that inspired Granny's own curly locks.

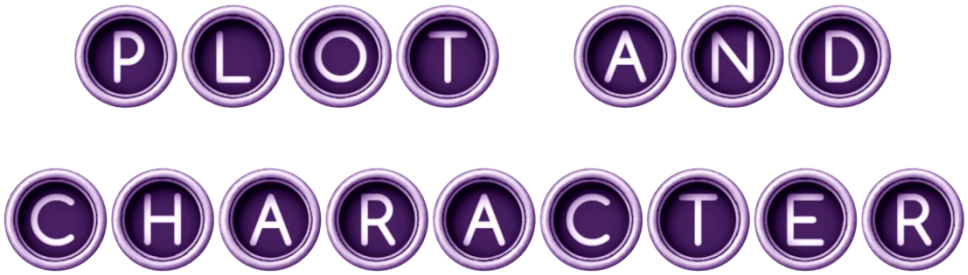
Grandmother Mary Oddy (*second left*), born before the Titanic sank, had a tough life. Mary Lancaster, as she was before she was married, had been a ten year old girl in middle of World War One and a mother of two young children with a husband abroad in the army throughout the whole war. There were few hugs or kisses from Mary, for hers was a 'tough love', the hallmark of many Yorkshire women of that era who had lived through difficult times.

Carolina Nallon, (*second left*), always known as Lena, was the paternal grandmother. Lena was the opposite of Mary Oddy in that she would smother everyone with her big bosomy embrace as soon as they were entered the house. Lena was one of those women who only ever looked for good in the world, but this meant, unlike Mary, she didn't recognise the darker side of human actions.

The quiet listener was Great Aunt Marjorie (*far right*), sister to Mary, grandmother on the maternal side. Marjorie was the observer rather than the chatterer, and would only share her thoughts about people after they had departed. For someone born in the Edwardian

era, her views were not perhaps typical of her generation, for Marjorie always talked openly and positively about gay people being no different to anyone else. And this live-and-let-life way of seeing the world strongly influenced the Granny character.





The Making of Character: Archetypes

"The collective unconscious consists of the sum of the instincts and their correlates, the archetypes. Just as everybody possesses instincts, so he also possesses a stock of archetypal images."
Carl Jung

Archetypes

There's a lot of talk in story theory under the umbrella heading of 'Archetypes'. Generally speaking, an archetype is the original model or prototype from which something is developed or made. In the context of story theory and story patterns, an archetype is a reoccurring figure or character with certain distinct attributes and ways of thinking that are universally shared across all cultures. The idea of the archetype was formulated by the Swiss analytical psychologist, Carl Gustav Jung. Archetypes, he suggested, are deeply embedded in humanity's collective unconscious and memory, and they manifest themselves in dreams and in *mythos*, or Story. Examples of archetype figurers include 'The Hero', 'The Innocent', 'The Rebel', 'The Trickster', 'The Shape Shifter' and 'The Lover'.



This way of looking at archetypes in Story was made popular by Christopher Vogler in his influential book THE WRITER'S JOURNEY. Essentially Vogler took some of the psychological theories of Jung and added them to Joseph Campbell's 'Hero's Journey' concept of Story. Vogler's main interest in archetypes was primarily the *story function* of the archetype within the tale. For example, 'The Shadow' as antagonist, 'The Mentor' as guide and 'The Shape Shifter' as both friend and foe.

On the other hand, another story guru, John Truby, takes the idea of an archetype as a way that allows the writer to explore contradictions and even paradoxes within a character. And Truby explores many archetypes beyond those of Vogler and Jung. For example, 'The Martyr'. The Martyr takes a stand for a better life, but, in their own way, the Martyr can also be an enslaver, enforcing others to join their cause. And sometimes the Martyr can suffer for suffering's sake, bringing pain where it isn't necessary. Then there's 'The Rebel', the questioner of authority and breaker of rules. On a positive note, the rebel has a noble goal, for they take action against

systems and institutions that are corrupt and enslaving. But it's not in their nature to offer ideas or alternatives as to how a society should be shaped, for their character mode is set permanently to 'against', which leads them to a state of constant and perhaps even unnecessary rebellion.

Next 'The Artist'. It's true that the artist character type helps society define what excellence can be, but if the Artist is too much the perfectionist, then they can be intolerant of error and end up destroying that which is good but flawed in their quest for perfect beauty. Then there's 'The Trickster' or 'The Jester', an Archetype that is looked at in Vogler's book. The trickster has the permanent desire to be naughty and funny, but often means they have little capacity to take anything seriously, including themselves. This lack of seriousness, where everything is a joke, can wear a bit thin to those who encounter the trickster, and lead to an imbalance within that can be self-destructive. As for 'The Warrior', well, they may be the enforcer of that which is right, but sometimes the warrior isn't always understanding, or indeed appreciative, of those who are less strong but perhaps wiser.

Then there's what we might call 'The Searcher' or 'The Explorer' who constantly seeks to grow and learn, yet so often this quest becomes an excuse not to commit. 'The Teacher' is the one who passes on knowledge so people can live better lives, yet on the negative side, students could end up being coerced into thinking in a

certain blinkered manner and not allowed to question or find their own way of seeing things. Help, as they say, is the sunny side of control.



The point here is that once you find the contradictions, the conflicts and the paradoxes and the conflicts in your archetype, then it's from these you can make complex, fascinating and believable characters. And you'll find examples of all the Archetypes discussed in both real life and Story. Here are just a few names and characters that may be familiar. Coriolanus. Miss Jean Brodie. Holden Caulfield. Leon Trotsky. Giacomo Casanova. Maximilien Robespierre. Bugs Bunny. Joan of Arc. Ace Ventura. Sir William Wallace. Captain Robert Falcon Scott. Vincent van Gogh…

Some more thoughts on character archetypes…

"I just watched so many Westerns as a kid that you end up using archetypes and sort of tropes of that genre, because there's a language there and you can twist it and turn it on its head or play to it or go sideways at any time.
Gore Verbinski, American film director

"The fairy tale is a great teaching tool for directors. Fairy tales are told in the simplest of images and without elaboration, without an attempt to characterise. The characterisation is left to the audience."
David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM

"We like our archetypes and heroes to be what they are at face value. And life doesn't work out like that."
Laura Dern

"That's what noir feels like to me. It feels like some kind of recurring dream, with very strong archetypes operating. You know, the guilty girl being pursued, falling, all kinds of stuff that we see in our dreams all the time."
Brian De Palma

"I look at the story, I look at the idea and just try to think of it in terms of that whole body of myth and see where the characters fit in and what they ought to be doing-all those archetypes are there to play with."
John Boorman

"While archetypes may emanate through us for short periods of time, in what we call numinous experience, no woman can emanate an archetype continuously. Only the archetype itself can withstand such projections such as ever-able, all giving, eternally energetic."
Clarissa Pinkola Estés

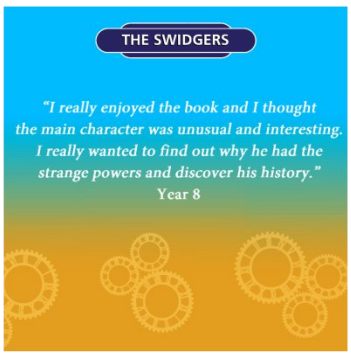
"All fantasy tales bathe in the same myth pool and soak in its archetypes and tropes. It's how each author tosses the stock ingredients of the salad that renders their telling unique."
Stewart Stafford



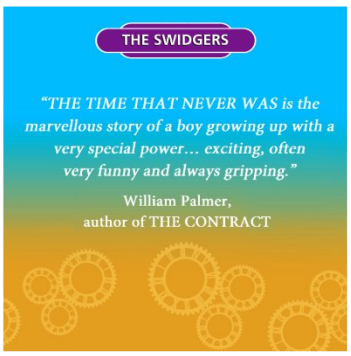
"The Hero of yesterday becomes the tyrant of tomorrow, unless he crucifies himself today."
Joseph Campbell in THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES

The 'Hero'

Dictionary definitions will say that a hero is a person noted for courageous acts and nobility of character. The hero often has special abilities such as strength and ingenuity with the result that they are regarded as a role model or ideal. In the Homeric period, the hero would often be a warrior-chieftain of special strength, courage, or ability such as bravery or resourcefulness. Think of Achilles in THE ILIAD or Odysseus in THE ODYSSEY. And specifically in classical mythology, a hero is a godlike person who may even become honoured as a divinity because of their outstanding achievements.







A dictionary definition will also tell you that a hero is the principle character in a literary or dramatic, and it doesn't take that much reading or play going to recognise that these various definitions are often in sync with each other. It's also worth noting by the way that 'Hero' in some modern dictionaries has now become a gender-neutral term, meaning that a hero can be a male or female or indeed trans-gender.

In story terms, the hero does not give into temptation. In their tale, they often undergo a test that they didn't choose. Their accolades and rewards, whatever they are, need to be earned. The book which goes into the most detail about the nature of the hero is Joseph Campbell's THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES. The title of Campbell's work is a clue to how he sees 'Hero'. The noun may be singular but 'Hero' has any number of identities and indeed stories. Although Campbell sees certain reoccurring narrative patterns in the basic story of the hero, it's important to point out the vast range of mythological tales that the book explores. Some have this message, some have that message. There are contradictions and inverses. It's essential to remember when considering Joseph Campbell and his idea of the 'thousand faces' of the 'Hero' that there is no single identity or easy definition for that hero.

Some more thoughts on heroes…

"The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there is something lacking in the normal experience available or permitted to the members of society. The person then takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir. It's usually a cycle, a coming and a returning."
Joseph Campbell in THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES

"We're past the age of heroes and hero kings. … Most of our lives are basically mundane and dull, and it's up to the writer to find ways to make them interesting."
John Updike, novelist

"I liked people who had problems I might have, because we all have insecurities, regrets. I like heroes who were not a hundred-percent perfect, who have things to take care of."
Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

"The hero and the heroine are those people who do not give in to temptation. The hero story is about a person undergoing a test that he or she did not choose."
David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE

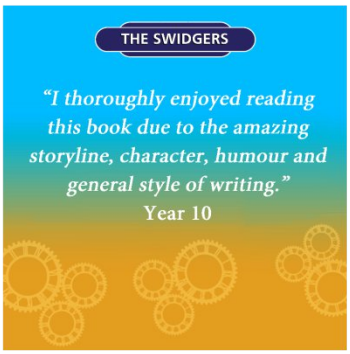
"Heroes aren't supposed to do bad things. That's what villains are for. So either the good supersedes the bad, or the bad makes it impossible to remember the good. We don't like it when such duality exists in one person. We don't want to know our heroes are human."
L.Z. Granderson

"A Hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and

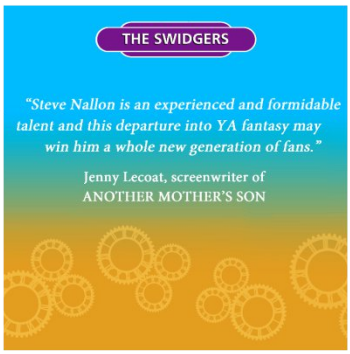
a decisive victory is won: The Hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."
Joseph Campbell in THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES

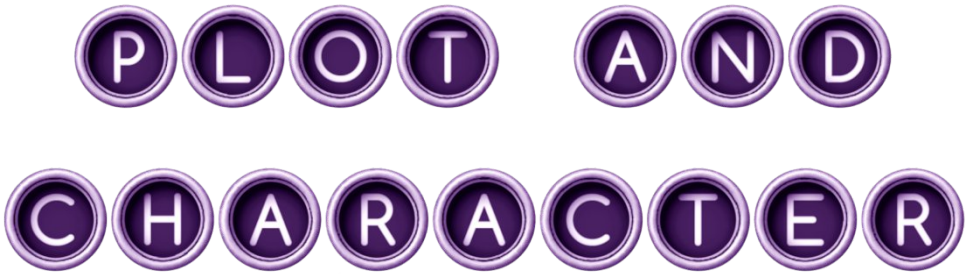
"It is important to provide the modern child with images of heroes who have to go out into the world all by themselves and who, although originally ignorant of the ultimate things, find secure places in the world by following their right way with deep inner confidence."
Bruno Bettelheim, THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT: THE MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF FAIRY TALES

"The journey of the Hero is about the courage to seek the depths; the image of creative rebirth; the eternal cycle of change within us; the uncanny discovery that the seeker is the mystery which the seeker seeks to know… The Call to Adventure signifies that destiny has summoned the Hero and transferred his spiritual centre of gravity from within the pale of this society to a zone unknown."
Joseph Campbell, author of THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES









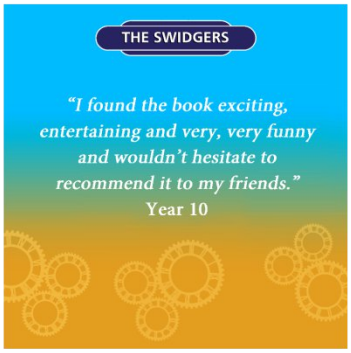
The Making of Character: The Arc of the Character

"Your characters must undergo a journey, too. Not just the plot. Few of us remain the same. Most change over the years – or even weeks or,in some cases, days. Where possible, it is always good to allow an audience to witness those changes in character that occur as a result of events. Unless, that is, you have taken a deliberate decision to keep one character constant throughout."
Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

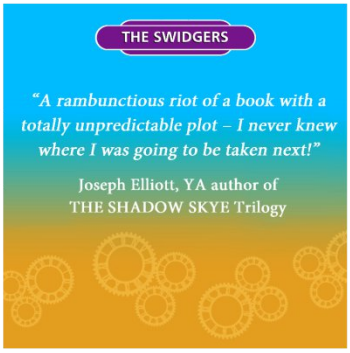
The Arc of the Character

'The Character Arc' is what writers call the internal change that occurs in the character as the story progresses. An arc in geometry is a curve between two points and storytellers use the term character 'arc' because as the character moves thorough a story there is a transition between what they were like at beginning point and what they are like by the end point. The arc can be any shape – smooth and gradual or rapid and acute – depending on the story you are telling.

If drama, put very simply, is change through conflict, then the ‘Arc of the Character’ is what it is that changes within that character. At the beginning of any story the equilibrium is upset and an event occurs that brings about the trigger for action (the inciting incident) and so the arc of the character is essentially the change that the protagonist experiences during the course of that action and the proceedings that happen as a result of it.







Of course many things can change in life. Change can be internal, mental, physical, sexual, plus a character can gain status or lose status. But let’s begin with the physical. And that most fundamental of changes, life to death, and indeed in Story, from death to life.

“Turning Mr. Chips into Scarface.”

How the series creator of BREAKING BAD, Vince Gilligan, described his overall goal and character arc of Walter White, played by Bryan Cranston



'O, that this too too solid flesh would melt
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world!'
Hamlet in Shakespeare's HAMLET

The Physical Transformation

There are many stories which deal with the self-destructive nature of human beings. Even though people are warned their behaviour and habits will kill them, they still continue that life style. It's there in ALL THAT JAZZ, LEAVING LAS VEGAS and Bette Midler's THE ROSE, loosely based on the life of Janis Joplin. Not that a self-destructive nature of human beings is anything new. The wish to die permeates pretty much everything Hamlet talks about all the way through Shakespeare's classic tale of melancholy youth. "To be or not to be…" and all that. And Hamlet, perhaps not surprisingly, even uses the present tense when he does die – "I am dead, Horatio" – as if it's been all he's ever really wanted to do.

In HAMLET, of course, there is the ghost of his father, which brings us to a change that takes us from death to life. Perhaps ghosts

aren't strictly speaking the best example of death-to-life stories as they tend to concentrate on their 'deadness', except in Noël Coward's BLITHE SPIRIT where the ghost of Elvira appears and acts very much alive. More so even than those around her.

The physical death-to-life transformation is certainly there in Mary Shelley's novel FRANKENSTEIN; OR, THE MODERN PROMETHEUS and indeed, of sorts, in the whole horror tradition of vampires and zombies. But death-to-life stories aren't restricted to the horror genre. For example, there's the Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger movie MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH, a fascinating tale set during the Second World War concerning a RAF man who should have died, his time was set and listed, but Heaven somehow never managed to claim him and in the meantime, in his extra hours of life, he fell in love.

Ignorance to knowledge is the basic change in many stories. Sexual maturation includes coming-of-age tales and stories of emerging sexuality and they are explored in a variety of genres. Think BEAUTIFUL THING, PORKY'S, LITTLE MERMAID, GREGORY'S GIRL and THE GRADUATE. And here we might add what it is to be masculine or feminine or indeed identify as a man or a woman. THE DANISH GIRL, inspired by the lives of Danish painters Lili Elbe and Gerda Wegener, explores, within the context of a love story, the nature of gender identity. Then there are stories of the sexual disguise (the sexual 'Shape Shifter') – SOME LIKE IT HOT, CHARLEY'S

AUNT, FIRST A GIRL, plus, of course, Shakespeare's gender shifting classic TWELFTH NIGHT.



And before we leave the idea of physical transformations, we should include stories where a human becomes a non-human, for example INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS, AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON, THE EXORCIST and CHILD'S PLAY, or half-human and half-machine, as in ROBOCOP and THE SIX MILLION DOLLAR MAN. There are tales as well where a non-human becomes human, PINOCCHIO and the *Pygmalion* myth, plus body-swop stories such THE MAN WITH TWO BRAINS, HERE COMES MR JORDAN and FACE OFF.

In the *Harry Potter* series, characters are forever using spells on each other to turn them into something else. Hogwarts even has a Professor for the subject, namely Minerva McGonagall Professor of Transfiguration. In fact, several plots in the series are dependent on wizards changing their form as a means of disguise. There are of course in myth and legends many creatures who are half-man, half-beast. For the record, a half-man, half-goat is a Satyr (there's one in

C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* tales); half-horse, half-man is a Centaur (the Mentor figure of mythology); half-lion, half-human is the Sphinx; half-chicken, half-woman is a Harpy; half-human, half-fish is a Mermaid/Merman (think here of the movie MIRANDA); half-woman, half-snake is an Echidna and a half-human, half-bull is a Minotaur. Yes, there's considerable variety in the human/animal kingdom. And the gods, too. Egyptian deities often have the heads of animals – Horus (Falcon), Bastet (Cat), Khnum (Ram), Ra (Hawk), Thoth (Ibis), Sekmet (Lioness), Anubis (Jackal).

On the broad topic of physical transformation we shouldn't miss out change at the dimensional level. People going from small to large (HONEY, I BLEW UP THE KID, BIG) or large to small (HONEY, I SHRUNK THE KIDS, THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN and THE FANTASTIC VOYAGE). And the classic Ugly Duckling story, where those who think themselves ugly suddenly become, or see themselves, as attractive. This is a theme explored in several Barbra Streisand movies such as THE MIRROR HAS TWO FACES, THE WAY WE WERE and FUNNY GIRL.

"'Hateful day when I received life!' I exclaimed in agony. 'Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance. Satan had his companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and abhorred.'"

From Mary Shelley'S FRANKENSTEIN; OR, THE MODERN PROMETHEUS



CHARLES RAINIER: Isn't there something morbid in burying one's heart with the dead?
PAULA: That's a strange thing for you to say. Your capacity for loving, your joy in living, is buried in a little space of time you've forgotten.
From the movie RANDOM HARVEST, screenplay by Claudine West, George Froeschel and Arthur Wimperis, based on the novel by James Hilton

Intellectual and Mental Changes

Intellectual and mental changes could certainly be described as going from 'ignorance to knowledge'. The knowledge gained could be insight, educational learning, self-realisation, memory, or even becoming sane again. But of course, as with any transformation, there is the inverse. And here mental/intellectual change would include amnesia, dementia and madness. Loss of memory and amnesia are explored in THE ENGLISH PATIENT, THE FATHER and RANDOM HARVEST, and madness and sanity are themes in Alan Bennett's THE MADNESS OF KING GEORGE, William Shakespeare's KING LEAR and Luigi Pirandello's HENRY IV.

Educational learning is a theme in EDUCATING RITA (1983), FREEDOM WRITERS (2007), SCHOOL OF ROCK (2003), PRECIOUS (2009), MR. HOLLAND'S OPUS (1995), DEAD POETS SOCIETY (1989), TO SIR WITH LOVE (1967), YENTL (1983) and MY FAIR LADY (1964). WAR GAMES (1983) is an interesting take on a learning-and-education tale as it is a computer in charge of a nuclear arsenal that must discover through playing Tic-Tac-Toe (noughts and crosses) that there is no winner.

"'The more I live – the more I learn
The more I learn – the more I realize
The less I know
Each step I take –
(papa, I've a voice now!)
Each page I turn –
(papa, I've a choice now!)
Each mile I travel only means
The more I have to go
What's wrong with wanting more?
If you can fly – then soar!
With all there is – why settle for
Just a piece of sky?'"

Yentl singing *Piece of Sky*, music by Michel Legrand and lyrics by Alan Bergman and Marilyn Bergman in YENTL



PSYCHIATRIST: Tell me, Harold, what do you do for fun? What activity gives you a different sense of enjoyment from the others? Uh, what do you find fulfilling? What gives you that... special satisfaction?
HAROLD: I go to funerals.
From HAROLD AND MAUDE, written by Colin Higgins and directed by Hal Ashby

Emotional Transformations and Love Stories

Most love stories are a variation on one of four basic tales: *Forbidden Love*, *The Eternal Triangle*, *The Odd Couple* and *Boy Meets Girl, Boy Loses Girl, Boy Gets Girl*. Most Fred and Ginger films of the 1930s are a variation on the latter. As for *The Odd Couple*, there's THE GHOST AND MRS MUIR, WINGS OF DESIRE, STARMAN, WHEN HARRY MET SALLY and LET THE RIGHT ONE IN. For *The Eternal Triangle* there's CASABLANCA, BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY, THE NOTEBOOK, THE GREAT GATSBY and VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA. As for *ménage à trois* there's Noël Coward's DESIGN FOR LIVING and for *Forbidden Love* there's HAROLD AND MAUDE and Edwards Albee's play THE GOAT, OR WHO IS SYLVIA? Yet what it is that changes in each of these tales is very different. For example, although the elderly Maude and the young Harold seem to enjoy going to funerals, Maude's ultimate objective is to make Harold embrace life. And she does this in part by ending her own.



Internal emotional transformations often involve a character learning to accept and love themselves. And usually this is done by learning to love another and putting that person first. That's a lesson Phil discovers in GROUNDHOG DAY and Rick in CASABLANCA. The changes from the self-hater to the lover and the cynic to the idealist are what make both of these tales stories of internal redemption. You might add here those stories where there are families, especially with absent or distant fathers, where the father somehow need to emotionally reconnect. For example, THE SOUND OF MUSIC and MARY POPPINS. And though there are exceptions, when it comes to emotional reconnection it is, at least in stories, where it's the men who are a problem. A rare example of a distant mother is to be found in ORDINARY PEOPLE, though the change here is the son leaving her.

There are also many stories in our challenging modern world, where trauma takes its toll on our emotional life. Marriages nowadays rarely last forever. In modern life one must learn to love again after one has gone through emotional hurt. That's a

transformation which is explored in SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE, PRINCE OF TIDES and SWEET CHARITY.

"A lot of people enjoy being dead. But they are not dead, really. They're just backing away from life. Reach out. Take a chance. Get hurt even. But play as well as you can. Go team, go! Give me an L. Give me an I. Give me a V. Give me an E. L-I-V-E. LIVE! Otherwise, you got nothing to talk about in the locker room.'"
HAROLD AND MAUDE, written by Colin Higgins and directed by Hal Ashby



"'Faith is believing things when common sense tells you not to. Don't you see? It's not just Kris that's on trial, it's everything he stands for. It's kindness and joy and love and all the other intangibles'"
Fred Gailey in MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET, written by George Seaton and Valentine Davies

Belief and Conviction

Belief. In God. In others. In humanity. Conviction. In yourself. Your ability. Your capacity to love. These are the transformations that move us.

There are many stories which take characters from insecurity to confidence (LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS, ERIN BROCKOVICH, THE

SCENT OF A WOMAN, MULAN) and from cowardice to courage (THE LION KING, THE WIZARD OF OZ, THE LORD OF THE RINGS). And all of these are explored in DEAD POETS SOCIETY. There is belief in others, even if what the other believes is completely ridiculous. MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET is about a man who thinks he's Santa Claus, but what matters ultimately to him isn't what the court case decides but what the little girl and her mother who have befriended him believe. Religious conviction can go from non-belief to belief (the Evelyn Waugh novels HELENA and BRIDESHEAD REVISITED) and from belief to non-belief (SILENCE, THE NUN'S STORY).

Political conviction is explored in the dialectical BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN. Two contrasting stage plays looking as political conviction are Trevor Griffiths' THE PARTY, where socialists meet and argue over how best to persuade people to the socialist cause and Arnold Wesker's drama CHICKEN SOUP WITH BARLEY, which takes place over twenty years and explores the challenges that Stalinism brings to the socialist idealist.



Spirituality and spiritual conviction is difficult to sum up. Perhaps the best way of describing and seeing then is as the principle of life that motivates and animates the physical. Is this the prevailing element of our psyche, the will of a person and their psychology? Spiritual stories from can go from bad to good, the redemption story as seen in CHRISTMAS CAROL, THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK, VERDICT, ANGELS WITH DIRTY FACES and even PULP FICTION. The classic Greek drama exploring this theme is Sophocles' PHILOCTETES. And then there are tales of good to bad, damnation stories that explore the *Faust* myth, for example, THE HUSTLER, DAMN YANKEES and ANGEL HEART. This idea is there as well in CITIZEN KANE, THE FIRM, THE COLOR OF MONEY and many of American tales exploring the darker side of the American Dream. On a more positive note there is the search and longing for home that so often in stories represents a need for inner peace. This is an idea that's there in THE WIZARD OF OZ and PARIS, TEXAS.

"'You've always had the power my dear, you just had to learn it for yourself.'"
Glinda in THE WIZARD OF OZ



CODY JARRETT: Made it, Ma! Top of the world!
CODY CLIMBS ON TOP OF A GLOBE-SHAPED GAS STORAGE TANK. HANK SHOOTS AT CODY. CODY SHOOTS BACK, HITTING TANK WHICH EXPLODES INTO A HUGE BALL OF FLAMES.
From WHITE HEAT, directed by Raoul Walsh, Written by Ivan Goff and Ben Roberts, based on story by Virginia Kellogg

Change in Status

Writers and story creatives tend towards a psychology that prefers to explore the downs rather than the ups of life. Some sociologists see this as a manifestation of the existential angst of the modern world, while mythologists argue that it is a mentality that has been there since the concept of The Fall, as expressed in *Genesis* and other myth traditions where humanity is separated from the cosmic divine. Whatever the reason, the Descent Story far out numbers the Ascent Story.

There are numerous variations on the Descent Story. Sometimes it's people having to deal with a sudden alteration in their material and social status. That's there pretty much in every Dickens novel, notably NICHOLAS NICKLEBY, where the reduced circumstances she finds herself in sends Mrs Nickleby somewhat deranged. Real world changes in economic circumstances often play a major role in descent stories. The 1930s and the background of Great American Depression gave us I AM A FUGITIVE FROM A CHAIN GANG, THE ROARING TWENTIES and WHITE HEAT, and the more

recent tough times have given us the remarkable I, DANIEL BLAKE (2016).



It's worth noting that when writers do tell an 'Ascent Story' it often has a contrasting 'Descent Story' to go with it. Shakespeare's RICHARD II, the rise of Henry Bolingbroke and the fall of King Richard, is a classic example. And if it is a stand-alone ascent story, then success usually comes at a cost. For example, in THE GODFATHER trilogy, where Michael succeeds in creating his own mafia 'family', but destroys his blood family in the process. In the typical showbiz ascent story, you can have the success and the fame, but rarely the love of another to go with it. That's a tale told in A STAR IS BORN, FUNNY GIRL, MACK AND MABLE and FOLLIES. But there are exceptions. And the positive ascent story is often as not a sports story based on a real life struggle. A good example of this is SOMEBODY UP THERE LIKES ME, based on the life of Rocky Graziano leading up to his victory over Tony Zale. But even this isn't a straight line all the way up, for there are set-backs along the way. That said, it

ends with victory in the ring for Rocky and a happy marriage to Norma.

ROCKY: You know, I been lucky. Somebody up there likes me.
NORMA: Somebody down here, too.
From SOMEBODY UP THERE LIKES ME, directed by Robert Wise and written by Ernest Lehman, based on the autobiography of Rocky Graziano written by Graziano with Rowland Barber



ANDY: His real name is Charles Lee Ray and he's been sent down from Heaven by daddy to play with me.
From the movie CHILD'S PLAY (1988) directed by Tom Holland, from a screenplay by Holland, Don Mancini and John Lafia, and based on a story by Don Mancini

Change of Identity

There are various way a character can change identity. The most obvious is through disguise, but there is also mis-identification, madness, plus what you might call Doppelgänger tales, where people who look alike change roles or are substituted in some way. On top of all these there's also body take-overs, body possession and body swap stories.



Mis-identification stories, and NORTH BY NORTHWEST is a classic example, tend towards the action/thriller genre, whereas body possession tales not surprisingly lend themselves to horror and the supernatural. Think of THE THING or CHILD'S PLAY. Doppelganger tales interestingly often turn towards social commentary stories, the classic example here being THE PRINCE AND THE PAUPER, the novel by American author Mark Twain first published in 1881. Set in 1547, THE PRINCE AND THE PAUPER tells the tale of two boys identical in appearance, one a pauper, the second, the son of Henry VIII of England.

In creating characters for such stories the key is often to think in terms of opposites – the most extreme opposite being a doll with the soul of a serial killer, in the movie CHILD'S PLAY. But a new identity naturally enough raises the question 'What is it that makes us who we are?' What, in other words, is identity? And such stories are often fascinating for writers who spend much of their time creating character identities. One such was the Italian dramatist, novelist, poet, and short story writer Luigi Pirandello (28 June 1867 –

10 December 1936). When Albert Einstein met with Luigi Pirandello he said “We are brothers.” What perhaps he meant was that both were relativists, Einstein with Time and Pirandello with the human character. Pirandello believed there was no such things as ‘I’ because we are a constant flux. Human beings are fluid and ever changing. And Pirandello explored this idea as a theme in his plays, notably ENRICO IV (HENRY IV). In the drama, an unnamed Italian aristocrat falls off his horse while playing the role of Henry IV during a carnival. When he comes round he believes he is Henry. His family are wealthy and so for the next twenty years they create an elaborate charade, including a villa decorated to resemble Henry’s imperial palace and staffed by servants hired to play the roles of Henry’s privy councillors, in order to maintain this delusion. Only ‘Henry’ begins to realise he is not who he is, or rather who those around him tell him his, but he is in fact someone quite different.

Some more thoughts on identity changes…

“Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.”
Oscar Wilde, DE PROFUNDIS

OPHELIA: They say the owl was a baker’s daughter. Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be. God be at your table!
From William Shakespeare’s HAMLET

GAVIN ELSTER: Scottie, do you believe that someone out of the past – someone dead – can enter and take possession of a living being?

From VERTIGO, directed by Alfred Hitchcock with screenplay by Alec Coppel and Samuel A. Taylor. Based on the novel D'ENTRE LES MORTS by Pierre Boileau

"We're like so many puppets hung on the wall, waiting for someone to come and move us or make us talk."
Luigi Pirandello, Henry IV (1922)



"Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing."
John Stuart Mill, the British philosopher, at the 1867 inaugural address at the University of St Andrews

The Gradual Arc

Some changes in a character come about through a sudden revelation or reversal, but sometimes too a character arc can be incremental and gradual. In fact that ancient story guru Aristotle made a distinction between what he called the complex plot (one that involved a reversal and discovery) and the simple plot (where there was a gradation of change).

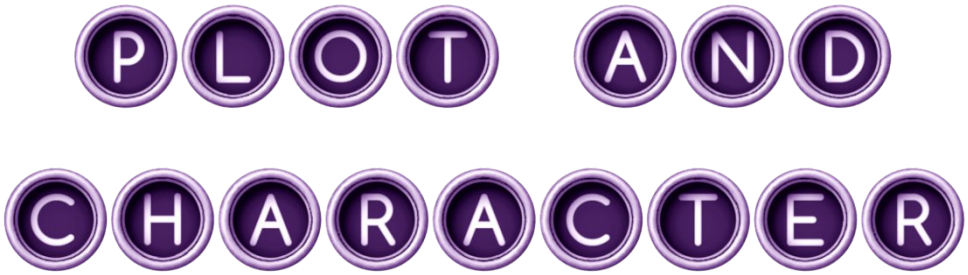
The *Wolf Hall* trilogy of course has many reversals and discoveries but its central character arc is the slow corruption and ultimate decline of Thomas Cromwell. Another incremental story arc

can be found in C.P. Taylor's 1982 drama GOOD in which a 'good' German gradually accommodates himself to Nazism. What makes the drama so powerful is that the moral descent is so chillingly plausible in its journey of dehumanisation.

Interestingly, most gradual arcs are ones of descent, for example, the alcoholic declines in THE ROSE and LEAVING LAS VEGAS. Sometimes the gradual arc of a slow decline is the second half of Rise-and-fall story, for example William Lindsay Gresham's 1946 novel NIGHTMARE ALLEY made into movies in 1947 and 2018.

"When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle."
Edmund Burke, British philosopher, in THOUGHTS ON THE CAUSE OF THE PRESENT DISCONTENTS (1770)





The Making of Character: Capacity to Change, Choosing Not to Change and Transformation Scenes

"The strength of the cause may add to the strength of the human being. A man can grow beyond himself, if the cause warrants it."
Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY

Seeds for Growth

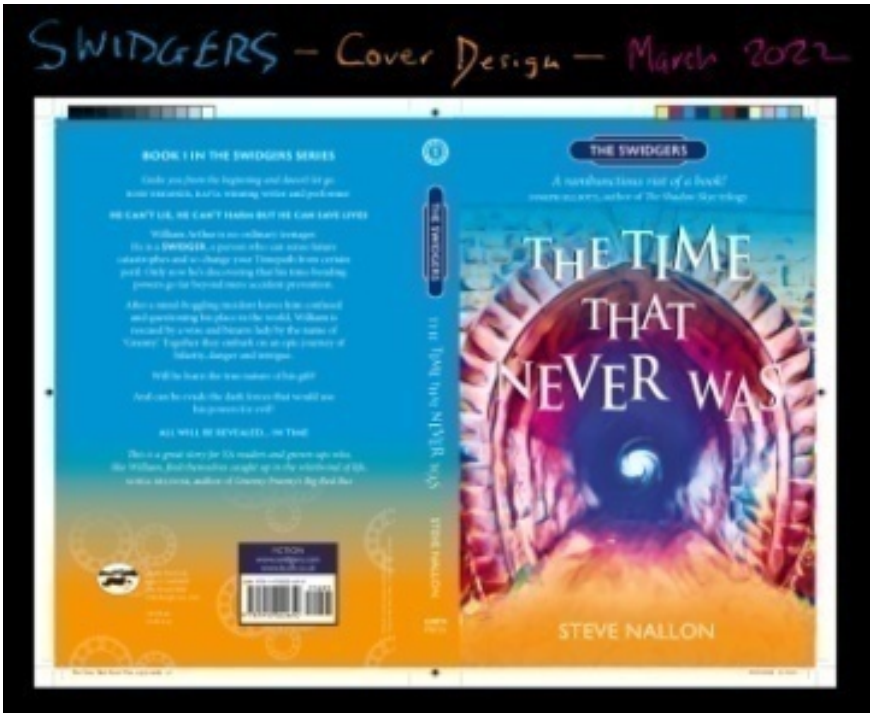
Capacity to change is an essential aspect of any character's construction. And it's important as well that if a character has a particular capability or facility – mental, emotional or physical – it is useful to set that up at the start. Plant the seed early, as they say. J.K. Rowling cleverly does this with Harry Potter's visit to the zoo. The glass in the snake house disappears by magic, causing much commotion. Well, that certainly established Harry's wizard capabilities. But what Rowling also does in this scene is introduce Harry's ability to talk to snakes, which, as it turns out, is incredibly

rare in the wizard world. Parseltongue is the language of serpents and nearly all known Parselmouths are descended from Salazar Slytherin, with Harry Potter being a notable exception. Why? Well, the answer leads to one of the biggest twists in the *Harry Potter* story and that is Harry's special connection with Voldemort. And the separation of Harry from Voldemort is ultimately the most important character arc in the story. The effortless ways in which Rowling sets this up so early in the tale is an example of her remarkable story craft.



William Arthur in THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, the first in the SWIDGERS book series, is another orphaned child with a unique gift. Again this is set up in the early chapters of THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, even though the full extent of William's ability and the truth as to what occurred that Saturday morning is not revealed until later in the series. William is a lonely boy but he is also very watchful and his capacity to observe and take in what he sees about those around him is one of the aspects of his character that most impresses Granny when she first meets him. And Granny knows that his

alertness to the world around him is what will stand him in good stead. It has to. If not, William will not survive the power that is coming for him.



"What's strange, as I think back now, is that it seemed as if my mind's eye were witness to what would happen even before it struck. I could see it all – the crystalline ice would pierce a hole in the slates as if it were a bullet. The wound it would be deep, but there'd be no yawning gash, for the hit would be precise and exact. Almost as if the ice had known all along the job it had to do."
From chapter one of THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS

"We should only choose emotions and characterisations which will allow graduation. They must be planned in such a manner as to make the gradual strengthening possible. Many a script, in a natural desire to graduate its intentions toward the end, permits

them to outrage their motives and characterisations… The result of graduated intentions from weak motives is a giant on baby feet."
Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)



BEN SANDERSON: We both know that I'm a drunk. And I know you are a hooker. I hope you understand that I am a person who is totally at ease with that. Which is not to say that I'm indifferent or I don't care, I do.
From LEAVING LAS VEGAS, directed and written by Mike Figgis, based on the novel by John O'Brien

Choosing not to Change

J.M. Barrie's PETER PAN at one stage had the title PETER PAN, OR THE BOY WHO COULDN'T CHANGE. J.M. Barrie was advised to alter one word, the 'couldn't' to 'wouldn't'. And that suddenly made it a very different sort of tale. For having the capacity to change, but choosing not to, is what makes PETER PAN in many ways a tragedy. Peter tells Wendy of the time he did go home – "I flew back, but the window was barred, for my mother had forgotten all about me and there was another little boy sleeping in my bed." A similar image, incidentally, of a young man outside a window, was used in

Spielberg's CATCH ME IF YOU CAN, which, in its own way, is also a story about a fantasist who refused to grow up.



The truth is, sometimes people have no capacity to change or they simply make a deliberate choice not to. LEAVING LAS VEGAS is about a man who goes to Las Vegas with the intention of drinking himself to death. He meets a woman, a prostitute, and, given all the redemption tales we've all seen over the years, we might imagine that somehow she will save him from himself. Only she doesn't. Not because she doesn't want – she does – it's just that he's made a decision to drink himself to death and so he does.

Another story relating to alcohol and the inability to change is HUD, a minimalist tale about Hud Bannon, an unscrupulous, selfish and arrogant womaniser, who sank into alcoholism after accidentally killing his brother in a car crash. Nevertheless, Hud Bannon is hero worshipped by his young nephew, who sees only good in people, especially his uncle. Again in this story the drunk does not change, however the scales do eventually fall from the eyes of the nephew

who at last sees the truth of his uncle's life and chooses in the final moments to leave the family home.

But 'no change' stories and characters needn't always be downbeat. SPIRITED is a fun take on A CHRISTMAS CAROL, where Ryan Reynolds plays an 'unredeemable' chap called Clint Briggs who is haunted by spirits on Christmas Eve, one of whom is the ghost of Scrooge himself, who was once also seen as unredeemable. It's a bit of a cheat to include it here because SPIRITED is a Christmas feel good musical and Clint Briggs does in fact find redemption, albeit by dying in the act of saving his friend. In this story though the afterlife is as much fun as the real thing and Chris Briggs is soon put to work redeeming souls back on earth.

HUD BANNON: You have another little drink and I'll have another little drink. Then maybe we can work up some real family feeling here.

From Hud (1963), directed by Martin Ritt, written by Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank Jr., based on the novel by Larry McMurtry



FAIRY GODMOTHER: Salaca doo la menthicka boo la bibbidi-bobbidi-boo
Put 'em together and what have you got?
Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo
Salaca doo la menthicka boo la bibbidi-bobbidi-boo
It'll do magic believe it or not
Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo.
From Disney's CINDERELLA, *The Magic Song*, written by Al Hoffman, Mack David, and Jerry Livingston

Transformation Scenes

Transformation scenes range from the magical to the cosmetic and from the emotional to the physical. The most famous transformation scene in Story is arguably "Cinderella, you *shall* go the ball!" Here the Fairy Godmother transforms a pumpkin into a coach and rags into a beautiful sparkling gown. A very different type of transformation scene can be found in sports movies where there's a montage sequence in which we see the growing physical strength and muscle power of boxers and the like. ROCKY offers a good example of this.



But it's important to remember that a simple change in a facial expression can also be a transformation scene in its own right. Dirk Bogart always said that film acting was 'photographed thought'. Bob Hoskins certainly achieved this in the final scene of THE LONG GOOD FRIDAY. In the car journey on the way to what he knows will be death, you, the audience, can see Harold Shand (Bob Hoskins) working out in his head how, where and why his plan went wrong. An ignorance to knowledge Transformation Scene indeed. And all done in facial expressions. Oddly enough, this scene was one of the first to be shot. The director John MacKenzie, who was driving, took Bob Hoskins through the events of the story and simply filmed Hoskins's reactions. The camera remains on him for five minutes non-stop. Another great example of a single-shot facial Transformation Scene can be found at the end of 45 YEARS, where Charlotte Rampling's face alone tells you that she now understands that her entire marriage has been based on a lie and a pretence.

At the other end of the spectrum are those very gory and gruesome transformation scenes in horror movies. One of the best, and made before the days of CGI, is that in AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON (1981). Then there are those 'Ugly Duckling' cosmetic make-over scenes and montages that abound in movies – JAWBREAKER (1999), NOW, VOYAGER (1942), SABRINA (1954), MISS CONGENIALITY (2000), SHE'S OUT OF CONTROL (1989), THE BREAKFAST CLUB (1985), MY FAIR LADY (1964), GIGI (1958), MAID IN

MANHATTAN (2002), EASY A (2010), STRICTLY BALLROOM (1992), ANASTASIA (1997), CLUELESS (1995), A CINDERELLA STORY (2004), MEAN GIRLS (2004) PRETTY WOMAN (1990), SHE'S ALL THAT (1999), THE PRINCESS DIARIES (2001), ROCKY (1976), EVER AFTER (1998), NEVER BEEN KISSED (1999), FUNNY FACE (1957), MOONSTRUCK (1987), ST TRINIAN'S (2007), MY BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING (2002), THE MIRROR HAS TWO FACES (1996). However, perhaps one of the most interesting 'Ugly Duckling' transformation scenes is the 1956 version of A STAR IS BORN, where Hollywood stylists and make-up artists try and change Judy Garland's face because there are too many things wrong with it, especially her nose. But of course for James Mason, who plays her lover and mentor Norman Maine, it's what makes Esther different which ultimately makes her face so interesting.

All the ugly ducklings listed here are female transformations. Oddly enough, male transformation scenes tend to take men to the darker side of their personalities rather than beautify them. Think of the initial magical makeover of the Prince in BEAUTY AND THE BEAST. Then there's the black cape in BATMAN, the evil transformation in JEKYLL AND HYDE, plus changes in WILLOW (man to pig), THE FLY (man to insect) and all those werewolf movies such as THE HOWLING, THE MONSTER SQUAD, FRIGHT NIGHT, THE WOLD MAN and, of course, AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON.

The most powerful transformation scenes emotionally are those which are crucial to the dramatic action, especially the climax. In TRAIN TO BUSAN, which is far from your standard zombie movie, Sok-woo and his young daughter, Soo-ahn, board a fast train from Seoul to Busan. However, during their journey, passengersbecome flesh craving zombies as a result of some sort of new virus. What's emotionally powerful about the father's transformation scene at the climax is that he desperately tries to stay human for as long as he can in order to protect and ultimately save his daughter. Most zombie transformations are pretty instantaneous but it's Sok-woo's internal struggle, once infected, that makes the scene so emotionally effective.

E.T. THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL has a comedy transformation scene where E.T. is dressed up as a little girl. But it's when E.T. is seemingly dead and in his ice-box coffin that there is not just a moment of transformation but one of transfigurations, for E.T.'s beating heart comes alive again and begins to glow red. Is this because E.T. knows his family are returning home or because Elliott has just said 'I love you'? What does it matter? It's one of the great transformation scenes in movies. And that's because dramatic context is all.

PROFESSOR HIGGINS: Eliza, you are to stay here for the next six months learning to speak beautifully, like a lady in a florist's shop. At the end of six months you will be taken to an embassy ball in a

carriage, beautifully dressed. If the king finds out you are not a lady, you will be taken to the Tower of London, where your head will be cut off as a warning to other presumptuous flower girls! If you are not found out, you shall be given a present of... uh... seven and six to start life within a lady's shop. If you refuse this offer, you will be the most ungrateful, wicked girl, and the angels will weep for you.

From MY FAIR LADY (1964), book and screenplay by Alan Jay Lerner, based on George Bernard Shaw's play PYGMALION



Some more thoughts on the arc of the character…

"Even if it only takes place over the course of a single afternoon, it is a dangerously dull piece of drama when not a single character alters or journeys anywhere from start to finish."

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

"Part of the Hero's Journey is that the hero (artist/protagonist) has to change her understanding completely, through the force of circumstance (which happens more often in drama) or through the force of will (which happens more often in tragedy). The hero must revamp her thinking about the world. And this revamping can lead to great art."

David Mamet, THREE USES OF KNIFE

"Because we grew up surrounded by big dramatic story arcs in books and movies, we think our lives are supposed to be filled with huge ups and downs. So people pretend there is drama where there is none."

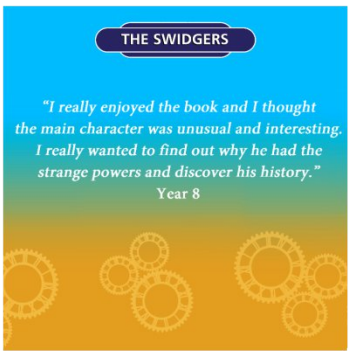
Kurt Vonnegut, writer

"As an artist, you don't think about the parabola or the arc you're describing or where you're going to ultimately end up, you're just kind of crawling around, seeing what's out there."

Michael Nesmith, American musician, songwriter, and actor, known as a member of the pop rock band The Monkees and co-star of the TV series THE MONKEES (1966–1968)

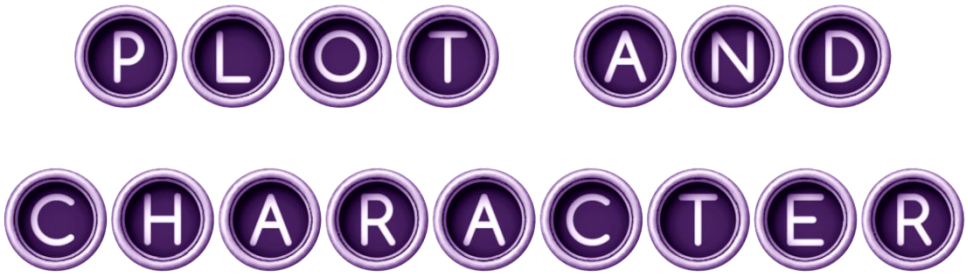
"A lot of the television industry is so cookie-cutter. In general, there are so many shows that are easy and bland to watch. You can tune in at any time and know exactly where you are in the story arc because it's pretty much the same every week."

Adam Baldwin, American actor









The Making of Character: Psychology, Desires, Motivation, plus Conscious and Unconscious Wants

"The motive invariably comes before the intention and the intention before the goal… An intention always leads into the future. No event can take place in the future unless someone or somebody or something intends it to happen. An intention comes into existence through a motive. The intention always wants to attain a goal. The goal is always identical with the elimination of the motive. Therefore, the intention becomes extinct as soon as the goal is attained."
Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

A Character's Psychology

Who is your character? What it is that makes them who they are? How did they get that way? Do they want to be different? If so, what are they lacking? Do they even know it? And is their desire to be different matched by a willing drive to change? Is there something wanting and needed in a character. In short, what's wrong with them? And here the point is that if there's nothing wrong with your character, you don't have a story.

Some more thoughts on a character's psychology…

"Characters must not brood too long. They must not waste time running up and down ladders in their own insides."
E.M. Forster

"The characters in my novels are my own unrealised possibilities. That is why I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented."
Milan Kunder, Czech writer who went into exile in France and whose work includes the novel THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING

"In displaying the psychology of your characters, minute particulars are essential. God save us from vague generalisations!"
Anton Chekhov in a letter to Alexander Chekhov, May 10, 1886

"You can never know enough about your characters."
W. Somerset Maugham

"It is my considered view that no one can invent fictional characters without first having made a lengthy study of people, just as it is impossible for anyone to speak a language that has not been properly mastered."
Alexandre Dumas *fils*, La Dame aux Camélias



"The beginning of a plot is the prompting of desire."
Christopher Lehmann-Haupt

Desires, Wants and Needs

Edward Dmytryk in his book ON SCREEN WRITING writes, "The overwhelming majority of stories are based on a need, a problem, or an unusual situation, or all three of these elements combined. An easily understood example would be the average 'private eye' melodrama. The problem is usually the commission of a crime – homicide, robbery, or a mysterious disappearance. The need is to solve the problem – to clear the innocent, to catch the killer, the thief, or the blackmailer, to recover the missing person or the loot. The situations are developed to set up conflict, to deepen the mystery and/or suspense, and to give the protagonist 'man-size' obstacles to conquer." In plot terms then, to distinguish the between 'problem' and 'need', perhaps think of problem as being a noun and need as always a verb.

Another issue with words such as 'problem' and 'need' and indeed 'want' and 'desire' is that story theorists define them in many different ways and others even use them interchangeably, especially when discussion the psychology of a character as opposed to plot lines as set out by Dmytryk. Desire, for example, could be said to be the most conscious of the three and it's usually there in plain sight. Want on the other hand, if defined in its more traditional sense and

usage – that is, that which is *lacking* – could be said to be the most unconscious. Need, well, that has more to do with necessity. You may desire a beer at the end of the day but you need water to survive.



Central to these distinctions is the knowingness of what is missing or lacking in a character. What it is that is wanting. Story gurus therefore often talk about 'conscious wants' (the striving for the goal) as opposed to 'unconscious wants' (that which must be learnt on the journey). Others make the distinction between the 'External Story' (conscious wants/goals/desires) and the 'Internal Story' (unconscious wants/needs/self-revelations). The idea essentially is that the Hero has initial desires that then develop, as the journey goes on, into a better understanding of what it is they truly need. Often this newly found need, the unconscious want revealed, means forsaking the initial desire, the conscious want. Heroes are often wrong about what it is that will bring about their own personal happiness. And wrong too on their capacity to change, often underestimating themselves. But let's then leave conscious

desires and initial goals aside for the moment and concentrate on the idea of that which is lacking and that which is necessary.

"When we look at films, we usually see only the action. Yet it is the decision to act that helps us understand how the character's mind works."
***Linda Seger,* MAKING A GOOD SCRIPT GREAT**



"When I used to teach creative writing, I would tell the students to make their characters want something right away – even if it's only a glass of water. Characters paralysed by the meaninglessness of modern life still have to drink water from time to time."
Kurt Vonnegut, writer and author

What is Lacking?

The idea of something lacking in a character is a key point in Vladimir Propp's book MORPHOLOGY OF THE FOLKTALE, where lacking is more than just an inner want but also that which needs to change in order to make a person more complete. And we see this in many folktales where the character has to correct previous behaviour in order to achieve their goal. In some ways then this

sense of want is lacking is not that dissimilar to Aristotle's term *harmatia*, a term incidentally that comes from archery and means 'just missing'. Over the years *harmatia* came to mean 'tragic flaw', and that concept was given an overtly ethical dimension by the neo-classical story theorists. However, that's not what we're primarily looking at here. That said, 'just missing' is close to what many of us are and what we can accept our human character to be, for, as someone one famously remarked, "Nobody's perfect."

"Tell me what you want and I'll tell you who you are."
Anton Chekhov



"I understood, through rehab, things about creating characters. I understood that creating whole people means knowing where we come from, how we can make a mistake and how we overcome things to make ourselves stronger."
Samuel L. Jackson, actor

Fixing Your Character's Problem

So, something is lacking and needed in a character. The story guru John Truby essentially divides wants/needs into two categories: the psychological and the moral. Put simply, Truby sees psychological needs as those aspects of a character's nature, make-up and

temperament that are lacking in him or her, whereas moral needs are more to do with how a character must learn to act towards others. Truby stresses that both the psychological wants and moral needs in the story must be interconnected with the task/action/strategy of the plot in such a way that the Hero must develop those parts of himself/herself that are lacking/needed in order to complete the task in hand.

Another way of saying all this is to ask 'What's your character's big problem?' And all story gurus stress that whatever journey the hero is on, and whatever task needs to be completed, the hero must fix that problem or flaw.

So, what are all these flaws? Top of the list is 'The Inability to Love'. And of course this includes not just others but yourself. A bit of a cliché perhaps, but it's still a popular story trope. Four more fixes are 'Be Forgiving', 'Be trusting', 'Be Accepting' and 'Have Faith'. Again, these include forgiving, trusting and accepting yourself as well as others, though of course selflessness is one learning arc that applies primarily to your relationship to others.



Yet doesn't all this begin to sound like one of those self-help books that has a chapter called *Lessons for Life*? Besides, what about their opposites? Forgiveness is all well and good but what is wrong with 'Righteous Anger'? Isn't that sometimes justified? And 'Love Others' is great, who can deny that, but obsessive love can be very destructive. And why can't 'Rejecting' and 'Doubt' sometimes be as important as 'Accepting' and 'Faith'? It's here perhaps that so many story gurus fall into the trap, as the neo-classical theorists did with *harmatia*, of making problem/flaws overtly ethical.

Of course we all like redemption stories. A classic example of this is Phil the sardonic and self-centred weatherman in GROUNDHOG DAY. It's only when he learns what's missing in himself and behaves less selfishly towards others that he is able to move on from the time loop world in which he's found himself. For much of the film, Phil's conscious wants are sexual gratification and the pleasures of food, but slowly that unconscious want to learn to love others reveals itself. It's a classic redemption story.

They say there are two sides to every story and equally for every story there is its opposite. Take BLACKADDER'S CHRISTMAS CAROL, which comically reverses the classic Charles Dickens Redemption tale. BLACKADDER is shown to be a good, kindly man, but one Christmas Eve ghosts show him that his ancestors were wicked – and as a result had much more fun than goody-two-shoes has been having. As Melchet says, "Greetings of the season to you,

Blackadder! May the Yule log slip from your fire and burn your house down!" The point here is that each 'Lesson for Life' has its opposite. And you'll find it often in comic stories.

Aside from comedy, there are those too who are rightly suspicious of endless 'love-has-no-boundaries' scenarios or 'social-justice-wins-the-day' partly because such stories often ignore the moral greyness of the world and as a result are both unconvincing and unengaging. Such stories maybe popular because they are unchallenging, but, as William Hazlet observed, "it's easy to get the mob to agree with you for all you have to do is agree with the mob." And the mob here would be people who prefer the lie that life is straightforwardly black and white.

Some more thoughts on fixing your character's faults and flaws…

"I hate a movie that will end by telling you that the first thing you should do is learn to love yourself. That is so insulting and condescending, and so meaningless. My characters don't learn to love each other or themselves."
Charlie Kaufman, director and screenwriter

"Truly it is an evil to be full of faults; but it is a still greater evil to be full of them and to be unwilling to recognize them, since that is to add the further fault of a voluntary illusion."
Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), French mathematician, physicist, inventor, philosopher, and Catholic writer.

"You take people, you put them on a journey, you give them peril, you find out who they really are."
Joss Whedon, American filmmaker, composer, and comic book writer, perhaps best known as the creator of BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER

"There is no use talking about the problem unless you talk about the solution."
Betty Williams, peace activist



"Actions are visible, though motives are secret."
Doctor Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), English writer, poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, critic, biographer, editor and lexicographer

Motivation

Some characters are more articulate than others in proclaiming their understanding of themselves and their motives. Some have self knowledge, others are a mystery even to themselves. Others have what you may call masked motives, meaning that the reasons behind their actions in the story is not yet known to the reader or audience.

A character's desire line or objective line is usually established at the inciting incident which becomes the trigger for action. Story theorists like to make a distinction between apparent and true ones,

as in spy thrillers, and conscious and unconscious wants, which are more psychological. An example of an apparent want disguising a true want can be found in WHERE EAGLES DARE. The scheme seems to be to rescue a captured British officer from a German fortification, but the true want is to gather a list of all the German spies operating in Britain, and most importantly the name of the mole in the British security services. In DIE HARD, Hans Gruber has the apparent want of prisoners being released ("The following people are to be released from their captors: In Northern Ireland, the seven members of the New Provo Front. In Canada, the five imprisoned leaders of Liberte de Quebec. In Sri Lanka, the nine members of the Asian Dawn Movement... [*covers the radio*] I read about them in *Time* magazine"). However, the true intention is robbery. And there's a clever twist in that Gruber needs the electricity to be switched off, which, ironically, is done by the FBI who believe that the switch off will hinder the supposed terrorists.



Motive leads to an intention which leads to an action which, eventually, leads to the goal. The rule with character is that each

must be in balance. A weak motive, for example, should not give rise to strong intention. It's important then that motivation is made as clear as possible and as early as possible. That said, there are stories with masked intentions. Walter Burke (Al Pacino) has, for example, a hidden intention throughout most of THE RECRUIT. Another example is Oliver Lang/William Fenimore (Tim Robbins) in the movie ARLINGTON ROAD. Both films depend on the audience not fully understanding their motivations until the climax of each story.

Occasionally actions can appear under-motivated. In THE ODESSA FILE, for example, the diary of a man who was a survivor of the Riga Ghetto camp during World War II comes into the possession of a young reporter, Peter Miller (Jon Voight). The dairy details the tyranny of the SS officer, Eduard Roschmann (Maximilian Schell), who ran the camp, including the murder of a highly decorated Wehrmacht officer. Peter Miller immediately becomes obsessed with tracking down Roschmann and even goes as far as going under cover, thus putting himself in extreme danger. But where this passionate motivation comes from isn't clear until the end when it is revealed that the murdered military officer was Peter's father.

Does it matter that the passion behind his motivation is not explained from the off? It would certainly make clear the reason behind his dangerous actions. But you would then lose the reveal at the end when Peter confronts Roschmann with his crime.

And then there's the opposite end of the protagonist-antagonist axis and that is the motivation of the villain. This is issue that story editors say is often overlooked by writers. Writers spend so much time concentrating on the hero's want/intention/motivation/action that they fail to do the same with the forces of opposition. And what you end up with is a badly drawn baddie with little explanation of their wickedness. Even Richard III, one of the wickedest characters in Shakespeare, offers some reasoning behind his villainy:

> But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
> Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
> I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty
> To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
> I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,
> Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
> Deformed, unfinish'd, sent before my time
> Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
> And that so lamely and unfashionable
> That dogs bark at me as I halt by them;
> Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
> Have no delight to pass away the time,
> Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
> And descant on mine own deformity:
> And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
> To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
> I am determined to prove a villain
> And hate the idle pleasures of these days.

Don't then be afraid to give the antagonist or shadow an opportunity to present the moral argument for their actions and beliefs, even if it is a morality and a reasoning that we, the reader or

audience, find perverse and repulsive. Let the shadow have their own back story, their own emotional hurt, which at least explains in part why it is they think and act as they do.

As said, the unconscious desire is what people truly want, only they don't realise it. And, as Robert McKee points out, unconscious desires are unchanging in the story. But that's not the case with the original conscious desire, for that is what is often thrown away at the moment of truth. And usually it's that decision which leads to the self-revelation of what they truly want. For example, in BEAUTY AND THE BEAST, the conscious desire of the Beast is to return to being a handsome prince, but in knowing Belle, an unconscious desire is revealed and that is to be a better person. And this the Beast does by putting Belle's happiness first by letting her return to her father ("I had to let her go because I loved.") This moment in a story is sometimes referred to as the relinquishing of self-interest. And you will find it in many redemption stories such as CASABLANCA and ANGELS WITH DIRTY FACES.

Some more thoughts on motivation…

"I don't know where Travis Bickle is from or what made him do what he did. I don't know and I don't care. That's what makes him compelling."

David Fincher speaking of Robert De Niro's character in TAXI DRIVER

"The writer may be tricked into developing his situation in some way that is unconvincing. This is perhaps the chief offence in bad fiction: we sense that characters are being manipulated, forced to do things they would not really do."
John Gardner, ON BECOMING A NOVELIST (1983)

"Discontent is the catalyst for change."
Mike Murdock, singer and pastor



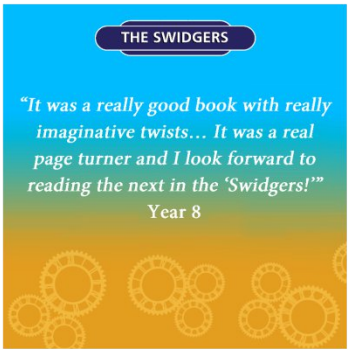
"The enduring draw of THE CHERRY ORCHARD is not that it is set in a dying Czarist Russia or that it has rich folks and poor folks. We are drawn to the play because it speaks to our subconscious – which is what I play should do. And we subconsciously perceive and enjoy the reiterated action of this reiterated scene: two people at odds – each trying to fulfil his or her frustrated sexuality."
David Mamet, WRITING IN RESTAURANTS

Intention

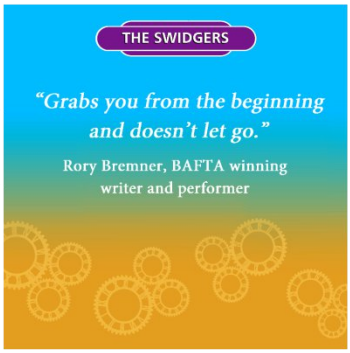
A word here about Anton Chekhov. Chekhov is a writer who finds drama more in intention than in what story gurus would normally classify as action. Those three sisters, for example, have every intention of going to Moscow but they don't do it. Their inaction is what the drama is about. It's a problem for them but it's not a problem in story terms, for that's just the nature of Chekhov's

tales and the type of characters Chekhov chooses to writer about. Take THE CHERRY ORCHARD.

As David Mamet points out in WRITING IN RESTAURANTS, the play has no protagonist and as a result there is no through-line action. “The obstacle in the play,” says Mamet, “does not grow out of, and does not refer to, the actions of the character. The play works because it is a compilation of brilliant scenes.”







So where’s the drama? For Mamet the play is essentially the same scene repeated by various couples. Two lonely people meet and one is about to propose when they are distracted by a mundane question or observation. Instead of riding over the interruption, they accept it but in doing so they lose the chance of happiness and sexual fulfilment. And often they know it will be lost. Those two lonely people are doomed to an empty life of frustration. Perhaps that’s why Chekhov ended THE CHERRY ORCHARD with Firs, the very elderly manservant, alone on stage, lost and forgotten. And the same fate awaits those who didn’t take their chance of fulfilment when it was there in front of them.

Chekhov's world is full of people with longings and intentions that invariably become frustrated or lost. As Mamet says, Chekhov's characters destroy themselves by too easily accepting their own unhappiness. But this lack of action in a traditional story theory sense does not make Chekhov a poor dramatist. The opposite. For only a truly great dramatist could create drama from longings and intentions alone.

Some more thoughts on intentions…

"Every utterance, however intangible, is at some level an expression of intent."
John Yorke, INTO THE WOODS

'The road to hell is paved with good intentions.'
Thought to be a Portuguese proverb, first appeared in full in a London newspaper in 1828 and was later published in Henry G. Bohn's A HAND-BOOK OF PROVERBS in 1855

"A gift consists not in what is done or given, but in the intention of the giver or doer."
Seneca, MORAL ESSAYS





"A story well told, containing conflicts and resolutions, gestures and expressions, and thoughts flavoured with emotion, connects people and integrates neural networks."
Louis Cozolino in THE NEUROSCIENCE OF PSYCHOTHERAPY: HEALING THE SOCIAL BRAIN

THE SWIDGERS - William Arthur's Psychological and Moral Needs

It has been said that it can be important to give the hero of your story psychological needs. In other words there must be something lacking in your protagonist. And it is important too that whatever these needs are, they should be part of whatever will be necessary in the final battle to overcome the antagonist or shadow. In THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, Granny says that defeating or destroying the Dark Force that seeks William is not possible because it is an indestructible energy. That said, according to Granny, it can be overcome if it is tricked of fooled in some ways.

So then, what are William's psychological needs? And what is it that is lacking in him which will perhaps help him in his final battle with this all too powerful force?

The two key psychological weaknesses of William are his lack of daring and a deficiency of imagination. In essence, William is a hesitant and reluctant hero who isn't yet mentally prepared for what

lies ahead and so first William needs to develop a willingness to take more risks. And second, William needs to develop a far more cunning way of acting – learn to “think round corners”, as Granny puts it. And it’s cunning, deceiving and duping that will prove to be the keys in any confrontation with The Despiser.



But there’s a problem. You see, Swidgers have many enhanced abilities, including exceptional hearing, yet it is their nature that they cannot be violent and they cannot lie. They are, after all, life-enhancing creatures of the Cosmos and so moral beings. So how can William learn to deceive and dupe without lying?

Well, that’s where Granny comes in. Granny recognises right from the off that William needs to grow and develop. She knows that it’s bravery and ‘corkscrew thinking’ which will be required in abundance if William is to stand any chance of surviving the confrontation with the Dark Force that awaits him. And it is that recognition of William’s weaknesses which ultimately gives Granny her own agenda and her own action, for it’s important to remember that although we are the centre of our own tale, we are, each one of

us, characters in other people's stories. And in those stories, *they* are the hero. And what this means in SWIDGERS is that Granny has an action plan all of her very own.



The core of Granny's scheme or schemes in the first half of book one, THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, is to intentionally put William in situations where he will be forced to be daring. In this sense, Granny compels our reluctant and hesitant hero to action. As for imagination, well, Granny takes William to Dungeness to meet Echo and it's in Dungeness that William's mind's eye, as it were, is extended and expanded beyond that of an ordinary Swidger.



Granny's schemes work well and by about half way through THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS William has indeed begun to develop the cunning and thinking he will need in the future. In the execution of her plan, Granny also succeeds in the practical objective of getting William out of school and away from the house in which he lives in. And something else too. Granny sees no point in life unless it is fun – and fun involves being silly! So silliness often features in her plans. And usually her plans work and so Granny gets the results she wanted. "Two birds with one stone", as she put it.

But of course it's important not to take all the action out of the hero's hands and in the first half of the book, as already said, William has his own agenda. He wants to discover more about his nature as a Swidger, what it is that makes his special *Swidger* gift so different, and why the force seeks it. But there's something else too. William reveals to the reader that he has been having doubts about his life as a Swidger. Swidgers intervene by altering timepaths, but what William longs to know, understand, and ultimately witness, are the actual changes that being *a Swidger brings* about. William does in part gain some of that knowledge when he explores the parchments in the hidden chamber beneath Echo's railway carriage home. He witnesses too Granny's success in changing at least one life at the Parent Teachers Meeting and he is pleased for her when he sees the fantastic results of her very odd intervention.

But none of this is enough for William, for what he wants more than anything is to witness the results of his own *Swidger* actions. This indeed does happen when, to break a time loop, he daringly and imaginatively saves a bullied boy from any further harm, for in the aftermath William sees in reflections of the school corridor window the future life of the bullied boy he has just saved. But so excited is William by this that what he does not see, or at least does not understand or realise, is the great significance of this new found ability. And exactly what that is becomes the key to THE TIME THEY SAVED TOMORROW, book two in the SWIDGER series.

But what of William's moral psychology? It has also been suggested that it's important that the main character in any story should have a moral need, a moral need being how you must change in your behaviour towards others. However, as William is a lonely Swidger teenage boy who doesn't want to be the centre of attention, there are fewer moral wants for a storyteller to choose from. But, in a way, perhaps it's William's very isolation that needs to be dealt with. William's moral need then isn't that he behaves badly towards others but rather that he doesn't behave towards others at all. And it's precisely because he too often chooses to be an isolated child that is his central problem. What William needs to do is engage more with life and people. And the gregarious and empathetic Granny is the perfect mentor for that.

Indeed, as the book series develops, Granny more and more encourages William to connect and engage with others. And slowly but surely William's need for others develops and deepens.

While on the subject of moral need there's something else that should be said too about SWIDGERS. It has been explained in the story that William has a 'gift' which he isn't yet fully aware of. Nor does he understand why he specifically has been chosen for this *Swidger* gift, a gift, as it turns out, that can be used for good or bad. And in the presence of a power that has been turned to wickedness, the innocence of William makes him susceptible to corruption. For isn't it sometimes the case that it's the very nature of innocence that can allow itself, almost unknowing, to be turned to doing something evil? And at the climax of book one, THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, evil and innocence come face to face in a cliff edge battle in a confrontation between Aloysius, William and the strange and powerful Oak Tree.

Of course, in most narratives the Hero and the Shadow confront each other in some kind of battle. And in adventure stories, there is usually the obligatory story trope at the climax of the adventure hero at the mercy of the villain. Think 007, Lieutenant Ripley, Batman, Wonder Woman, Indiana Jones, John McClane and so on. And more often than not, it is ingenuity and smart thinking rather than brute strength that allows the Hero to extricate themselves from a seeming precarious death-awaiting predicament.

How the hero does this is ultimately down to the inventiveness of the writer. Whatever it is, it should be unexpected yet there all along, though sometimes there is a false hope offered that then is suddenly removed. And there's one such moment in the cliff-edge battle at the climax of THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS:

> "I looked down, but hardly believed what I saw.
>
> My legs were somehow moving forwards towards the Tree and now my arms were rising up and stretching out, reaching for the Tree and Aloysius. I tried to pull them back, I tried to stop my steps, but could not.
>
> Suddenly what seemed like dark shadows surrounded me and a voice from nowhere cried out, 'Go no further, William Arthur!'
>
> *Zavier! Blind Zavier.*
>
> I spun my head. Yes, here he was behind me, his long black cloak spread high in the air like a giant bat. His reddened hands took me by the shoulders.
>
> That voice, though scratched and blistered, roared. And so loudly that it must have caused him pain, 'Aloysius! *Illi autem non habent!* You shall not have him!'
>
> 'Traitor!' yelled Aloysius. 'You will burn again, as you did before.'
>
> Zavier held me back but my legs still wanted to move forward. Aloysius stretched out his hand further.
>
> 'Let go of the Boy, Zavier! Let him choose for himself,' he entreated. 'It is his life, not yours.'
>
> Slowly Zavier's hold lessened and my legs, once more, began taking me to towards the Tree.
>
> 'Give in to its pull. It wants you. It knows your gift. It will help you enhance your power, as it did with me when I was "the Boy". Touch my hand, Child! Flesh on flesh. Give me your palm and know the Power of Hands and the Gain of the Tree!'

It was as if I was in a trance. I tried to resist, defy it, yet something inside kept drawing me towards them both."

Does William survive? Will he be able to resist the power that draws him closer? Or the out-stretched hand of the wicked Aloysius? The climax of THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS is, in a very literal way, a cliff-hanger.

"I personally love a cliff-hanger – I think it just extends the pleasure of viewing."
Mireille Enos



"You don't really understand an antagonist until you understand why he's a protagonist in his own version of the world."
John Rogers

THE SWIDGERS – The Villain's Back Story

It has been suggested that it is useful to give your opponent an opportunity to present the reason for their actions and beliefs, even if that reasoning is flawed or wilful. Articulating the Shadow's way of thinking certainly gives an extra dimension and motivation to a story and in his several confrontations with William in THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS, the antagonist, Aloysius, explains in detail why he chose the path he did. It's a popular maxim in story theory that an

antagonist is the protagonist of his own story. And in discovering Aloysius's own painful history, you, the reader, may even find a degree of pathos in his back story. But of course an explanation is never an excuse. Yes, the reader can at least begin to understand the *Why* of that secret world of the Old Coach Inn, yet it is still a wicked world that needed to be brought to an end.

In many ways the theme of Aloysius's moral argument about life returns in book two, THE TIME THEY SAVED TOMORROW, when that mysterious force that attacked in the early chapters of THE TIME THAT NEVER WAS finally confronts William face to face. The case against humanity which the force, The Despiser, articulates is an extreme version of Aloysius's own way of thinking. But in the argument put forward by The Despiser in the Origin Story of the Swidger Universe goes much further in its philosophy and cosmic thinking. Indeed, the Dark Force's case is almost Miltonian. And without giving too much of the plot of book two away, it is an argument that is even presented through Aloysius himself, albeit in an unexpected form. But we have probably already given away too much.

Some more thoughts on villains…

"An excellent man, like precious metal, is in every way invariable; A villain, like the beams of a balance, is always varying, upwards and downwards."

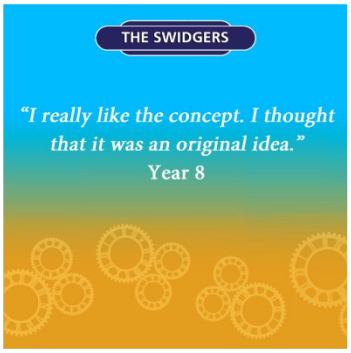
John Locke, English philosopher

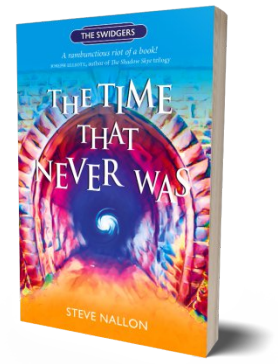
"A cinema villain essentially needs a moustache so he can twiddle with it gleefully as he cooks up his next nasty plan."
Mel Brooks, film maker

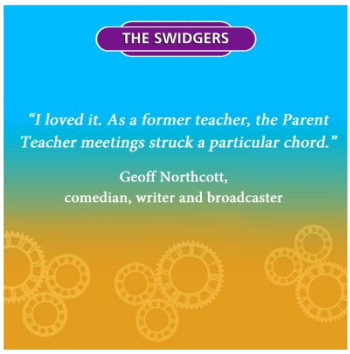
"Nobody is a villain in their own story. We're all the heroes of our own stories."
George R. R. Martin, American novelist

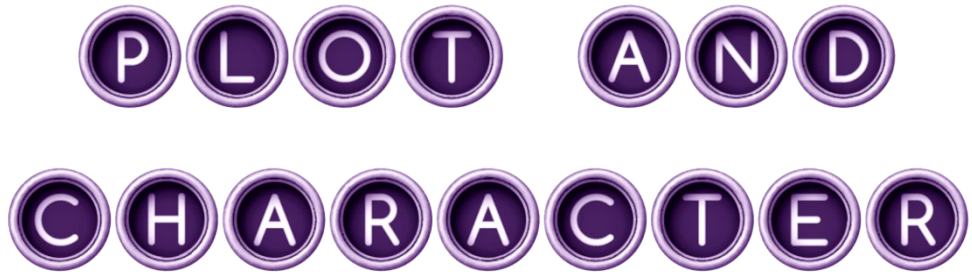
ROCKY SULLIVAN (played by James Cagney): To be afraid, you gotta have a heart. I don't think I got one. I had that cut out of me a long time ago.
From ANGELS WITH DIRTY FACES

"Behind every villain is a truth, whether it be perceived or actual."
Dalton Frey, author









The Making of Character: Thoughts from Writers on Creating Characters

"When writing a novel a writer should create living people; people not characters. A character is a caricature."
Ernest Hemingway, DEATH IN THE AFTERNOON

"Respect your characters, even the minor ones. In art, as in life, everyone is the hero of their own particular story; it is worth thinking about what your minor characters' stories are, even though they may intersect only slightly with your protagonist's."
Sarah Waters, Welsh novelist

"When I'm creating characters, I definitely think of theme songs. Writing for me is very visual, so I sometimes think of it in terms of a movie with a soundtrack, and try to transfer that to words."
Marisha Pessl, American writer known for her novels SPECIAL TOPICS IN CALAMITY PHYSICS, NIGHT FILM, and NEVERWORLD WAKE

"Don't expect the puppets of your mind to become the people of your story. If they are not realities in your own mind, there is no mysterious alchemy in ink and paper that will turn wooden figures into flesh and blood."
Leslie Gordon Barnard, Canadian novelist and short story writer

"If you're silent for a long time, people just arrive in your mind."
Alice Walker, novelist

"It begins with a character, usually, and once he stands up on his feet and begins to move, all I can do is trot along behind him with a paper and pencil trying to keep up long enough to put down what he says and does."
William Faulkner, writer

"I try to create sympathy for my characters, then turn the monsters loose."
Stephen King



"The character that lasts is an ordinary guy with some extraordinary qualities."
Raymond Chandler, writer

"True character is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure – the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation, the truer the choice to the character's essential nature."
Robert McKee, STORY: SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING

"Characters in plays are there, when it boils down to it, to perform certain tasks: to further the plot whilst also informing us – directly or indirectly, through word and deed – of their individual thoughts

and emotions. That's an oversimplification but it's not a bad place to start."

Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

"In order to deduce the characteristic which determined the action, it is not necessary to see the action in its actual execution. To expose the result of an action or the intention to do an action is sufficient. This opens a wide range of possibilities for revealing character. For instance, when David decided to fight against Goliath, he proved his courage before he even got into the struggle."

Eugene Vale, THE TECHNIQUE OF SCREENPLAY WRITING (1944)

"If you're writing about a character, if he's a powerful character, unless you give him vulnerability I don't think he'll be as interesting to the reader."

Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

"In my conversations with other playwrights, I have discovered that there is more divergent practice in the field of characterisation than any other aspect of playwriting. Some writers engage in intense visualisation; some almost invariably base characters on people they know; some begin by thinking about actors who might play the parts; and others engage in psychological speculation. Every one of these approaches is valid."

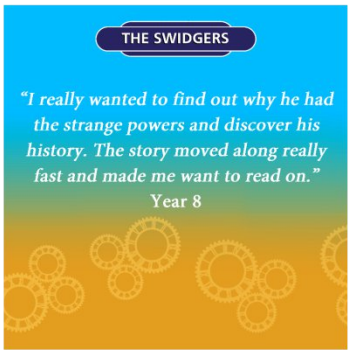
Stephen Jeffreys, PLAYWRITING: STRUCTURE, CHARACTER, HOW AND WHAT TO WRITE

"An audience that doesn't care stops listening in the end. Indeed, they might even leave the theatre. They need to care about your characters. (So you should too.)"

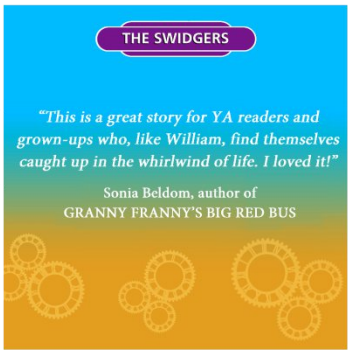
Alan Ayckbourn in THE CRAFTY ART OF PLAYMAKING

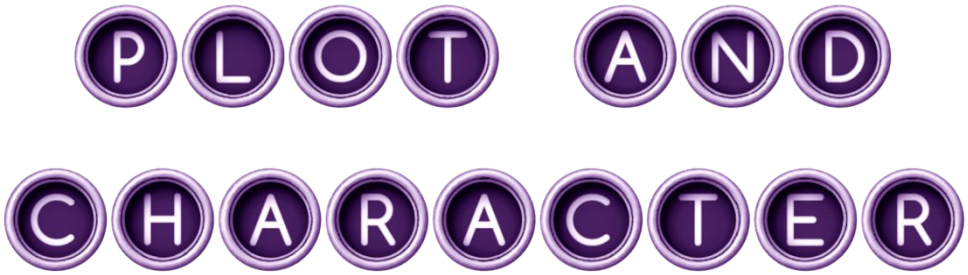
"There is no such thing as character other than habitual action… 'Character' is exactly what the person does in pursuit of the super-objective, the objective of the scene. The rest doesn't count."
David Mamet, ON DIRECTING FILM

"Just because you have superpowers, that doesn't mean your love life would be perfect. I don't think superpowers automatically means there won't be any personality problems, family problems or even money problems. I just tried to write characters who are human beings who also have superpowers."
Stan Lee, American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer

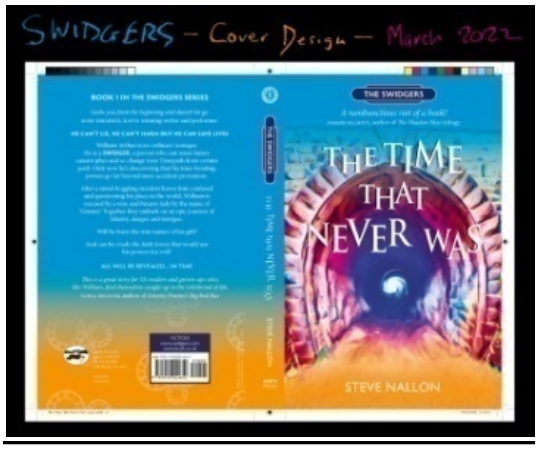








The Plotting of *The Time That Never Was* and *A Christmas Carol*



The Time That Never Was is a coming-of-age tale and so **The Day of Change** is when William, the **Protagonist/Hero**, begins to feel that something is different within him. For the first time in his life William – a Swidger who alters people's timepaths for the better – senses exactly what is about to happen if he does not intervene: '*Hang on a second… What was that? Save his life! Where did that thought come from? And how could I know? Because our kind never*

know.' And not without coincidence, as the plot later reveals, an attack from a mysterious power comes on the same day as William is experiencing these inner changes, or 'Swidger growing pains', as Granny later describes them.

The mysterious attack becomes **The Trigger for Action** because William from then on wants to know (**Motivation and Desire**) why there has been this attack, and why he is different from other Swidgers (**The Puzzle**). And so *to discover* and *to understand* become the central **Actions** of the story.

But William is just a boy, so how will he manage to do this when he isn't even sure what is even happening to him? Plus he's an orphan (William's **Back Story**) who has no protector. Well, that's where the role of Granny comes in (**The Helping Hand**). As said, *The Time That Never Was* is coming-of-age story and in such tales there is usually an older helper figure – that is the **Mentor** character.

Granny (**The Mentor**) recognises straight away that William isn't ready to take on the mystical power that seeks him out. This is because, first, William isn't daring enough, and second, he needs to develop a different way of thinking (both of these are **Inner Flaws** in William). And Granny knows as well that William needs to understand more about what a Swidger is, so she takes him to meet Echo in Dungeness – and the tale that Echo tells on the beach is essentially the **Back Story** of the Swidgers.

But William in Dungeness has plans of his own and when he is alone in Echo's converted railway carriage, William begins his search (William's **Strategy**) in order to find out more about himself. This does lead to an understanding of sorts (**From Ignorance to Knowledge**) and afterwards, and for the first time, William dreams (**Turning Point**).



On the return to London, Granny decides to put William in places and situations where he must learn to think in new ways ("For the battle ahead, my little stick of rhubarb, you must become a poet, develop a corkscrew mind, learn to think round corners, and, most importantly, imagine"). Putting William in positions where he has to take the initiative for himself is essentially Granny's **Strategy**. For example, Granny abandons William in the school staff room just as he is adding a strange liquid she has given him to a barrel of cider. The headmaster comes and so it's up to William to explain himself and get out of his predicament. The potion will puts in the barrel of cider leads to much comedy and farce, but this action (William's **Set**

Task) also results in William being expelled from school, which is the main **Turning Point** at the mid-section of book one. Now free from school obligations, Granny can take William where he'll be safe from harm and this is the Old Coach Inn.

Much of the first half of *The Time That Never Was* is focused Granny's action plan to make William more daring (Granny's **Strategy**), but it was also her intention of getting William expelled from school (Granny's **Goal**) because she knows he wouldn't be safe there. Having achieved what she intended, that part the story is now over (the **Climax**) and another can begin.

On arriving at the Old Coach Inn, William realises the house has a secret (the House's **Puzzle**) and so William becomes determined to find out what it is. And his action plan (William's **Strategy**) is to explore behind concealed doors and along the house's hidden passageways.

The ruler of the Old Coach Inn is Aloysius (**The Antagonist/Villain**) and Aloysius is determined to keep William in his place and retain his control over all those who live in the house. And this Aloysius does by intimidation and threats of violence (Aloysius' **Strategy**). But William eventually works out the secret of the house (**From Ignorance to Knowledge**) but this discovery leads to an encounter between Aloysius and William where Aloysius, who has a special gift of Time, takes complete and utter control over William.

This is another of William's low points.

Yet it becomes clear that William's arrival at the Old Coach Inn has altered the power dynamics in such a way that there must be a battle for supremacy between Aloysius and William. Aloysius believes that by setting fire to the parchment (Aloysius' **Strategy**) that spoke of William and his future, Aloysius can destroy any possibility of William taking over from him. However, a burning fragment of the parchment does the opposite and a destructive blaze destroys the house (**The Unexpected Outcome**). This leads to cliff-edge struggle between William and Aloysius (**The Confrontation**) and in the process William nearly loses Granny (**Crisis Point**), but then William sees an unexpected opportunity and uses the helmet Granny has worn to protect her from the fire to unbalance Aloysius (**Reversal of Fortune**), who then falls to his death (**The Climax**).

In **The Resolution**, Granny now feels able to tell William things about being a Swidger that she couldn't explain before. Granny, William and the survivors of the fire then journey to London to hopefully begin a new life.



So that is the story of *The Time That Never Was* and what happened at the Old Coach Inn – but what about that mysterious attack and who or what made it? The point here is that THE SWIDGERS is a trilogy and the **Antagonist** of the second book *The Time They Saved Tomorrow* is revealed to be that mysterious force we first encountered in the early chapters of book one. The Despiser, a malevolent and powerful force of Time, has from the beginning sought out William's gift and he's done it in a very craftily (The Despiser's **Strategy**). And in a way it's William's Swidger gift that is the story's 'clock' (**Time Limit**), for the moment William truly understands what makes him different, well, that's when the final attack will come (**The Confrontation** of book two). And to make things more complicated, The Despiser (**Villain/Antagonist**) cannot be killed, and besides, Swidgers are, by their nature, unable to use any form of violence.

In *The Day They Saved Tomorrow*, The Despiser ultimately offers William an **Impossible Choice**: he will let Granny live but in return William must share his gift. But William knows by now that The Despiser will only use that gift to make people suffer. So what to do?

Although the **Villain** cannot be ever be killed or destroyed, it can be outwitted. And William comes up with a plan (William's **Strategy**) to save Granny and send that malevolent force of Time

back from where it came…

Note that in THE SWIDGERS there are many strategies and indeed many counter-strategies. Note as well that Granny's action plan is eventually successful (William does get expelled) and so that part of the story then comes to an end when William is expelled. That was her goal so once achieved that is the climax of that particular action. Granny in some ways is more than a helper, for she acts essentially as a protagonist. And by book three William and Granny come together as joint protagonists, acting together as one force.





The Story Steps of *A Christmas Carol*

No storyteller keeps exactly to the 21 Story Steps as if they were some sort of magic formula, for there are always adaptations, deviations and exceptions. In *A Christmas Carol*, a tale that does include most of the Story Steps in its structure, Charles Dickens brilliant develops and varies the key elements of Story in such a way that makes his tale truly original. What matters then is *how* writers modify and reinvent these Story Steps in order to create an engaging, entertaining and imaginative work.

The Inner Flaw or Problem. Scrooge's problem is pretty obvious – he has cut himself off from the world like an oyster in its shell ("It's enough for a man to understand his own business, and not to interfere with other people's"). Scrooge's moral need – how a character must learn to act towards others – is that he must reconnect with that world and the people in it. His psychological

need – that aspect of a character's nature that is lacking within them – is that he must believe it is possible for him to change.

The Day of Change – the arrival of Marley. Marley first appears in the knocker, but his return is foreshadowed in the opening line. Marley is essentially the herald of the tale and in *A Christmas Carol* he has three main functions. The first is to tell us what will happen – three spirits will visit Scrooge. Second, Marley acts as a call-to-action to Scrooge to change his ways and to this end Marley shows Scrooge what will happen if he does not. Third, Marley offers the reader a glimpse into the unknown supernatural world into which they are about to journey.



The Back Story – the Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge back to his 'back story'. It's not normally possible to visit your own back story, except in time travel stories or perhaps in dreams. In *A Christmas Carol* though it does happen because we have entered the world of the supernatural where anything is possible. And the creation of such a tale shows us Dickens' remarkable powers of imagination and story inventiveness.



The Task/Strategy – In most stories the main character is given a task to complete or they have to come up with some sort of an action plan in order to achieve their goal. Marley is the one who tells Scrooge that he must change his ways and to help bring this about Marley tells Scrooge that he will be visited by three spirits. Later, the Ghost of Christmas Past is more specific about his purpose when he says that his aim is Scrooge's welfare and 'reclamation'. And to help make this happen the Ghost of Christmas Past shows Scrooge his past, including his lonely school days and his time working for Mister Fezziwig.

The strategy then in *A Christmas Carol* is clear and it's in the hands of the three spirits. If this is so, what is Scrooge's own **Action**?

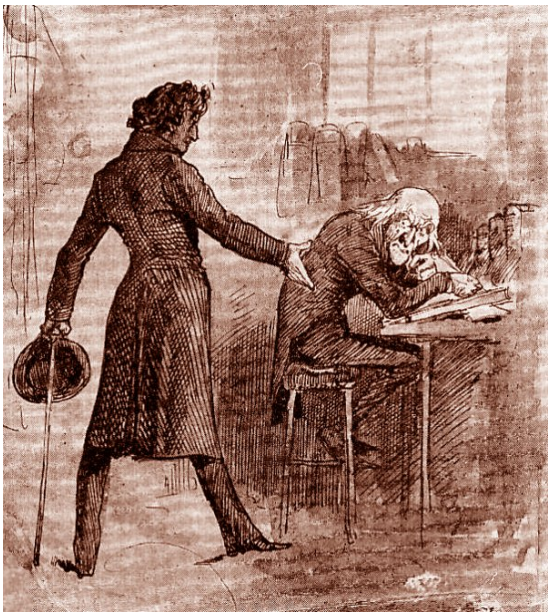


Scrooge is what you might call a passive character in that he does not initiate the 'action plan'. However, that doesn't mean that Scrooge hasn't got his own action going on inside him.

The key to Scrooge's internal action can be found all through the tale but particularly in the scene at his nephew's Christmas party where Dickens writes, 'When this strain of music sounded, all the things that Ghost had shown him, came upon his mind; he softened more and more; and thought that if he could have listened to it often, years ago, he might have cultivated the kindnesses of life for his own happiness with his own hands, without resorting to the sexton's spade that buried Jacob Marley.' Scrooge is made *to think* and *to feel* (both verbs) and so it's *thought* and *feeling* brought together that becomes Scrooge's **Action**. Ultimately Scrooge's task action is to change and it's through these acts of contemplation as Ebenezer observes each scene that accumulatively leads to his reclamation.

Time Limit – often in a story there is a deadline to increase the jeopardy and the stakes in a story, yet in *A Christmas Carol* it seems to be the opposite. In fact, in this tale Time in its most conceptual sense collapses, for the hours Scrooge is away with the spirits is not one long night measurable by a clock. There's his time at his old school, his time at the Fezziwig party and his time at the home of his former fiancé Belle. And during the visitation of the Ghost of Christmas Present, Dickens makes it clear that Scrooge enjoys the

whole Christmas season of twelve days. None of these hours and minutes and days can be measured simply by a turning dial. Yet that that's exactly how Scrooge does think of Time, that is, as something that should and can only be measured by the ticking of timepieces and the chiming of bells on the hour, both of which are heavily featured in the narrative.



But Fred, Scrooge's nephew, offers Scrooge a different perspective. He sees Christmas Time "as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely."

This view of Time is more abstract than literal. And part of the journey of Scrooge in the tale is to learn to think of Time more in this way. Scrooge visits his Time Past, his Time Present and his Time

Future, and is fundamentally changed by each of them. However, what really matters is that to be complete as human being Scrooge must live, as he says himself, “in the Past, the Present, and the Future”. And what he learns on his journey is that to live in the Past is *to be alive to Memory*, to live in the Present is *to know your fellow Man*, and to live in the Future is *to be open to Hope*.

So when Scrooge says, “The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me” what he is really expressing is the need of all of us to be in communion with all our different selves and, as Fred puts it, our “fellow-passengers to the grave.” And if this new thinking is achieved, ‘Time’ will be always be measured by love and not by the turning dials of a clock on the wall.

Protagonist and Antagonist – as said, the central ‘action plan’ is in the hands of Marley and the Phantoms, and so technically this makes them collectively the protagonists with Scrooge the one resisting their offer of help (compare here perhaps the angel Clarence and George Bailey in the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*). However, as *A Christmas Carol* is a redemption story, the central conflict and struggle is mainly within Scrooge himself, for he doesn’t believe he can change.



Yet there is Scrooge's final **Confrontation** with the Ghost of Christmas Future. It's here in the graveyard that Scrooge comes to realise that he was the corpse he saw earlier that lay abandoned and uncared for (**From Ignorance to Knowledge**).



Understanding he is that dead man who in death is alone and unloved and only wanted by rats gnawing at the door is Scrooge's nadir (**The Hour of Despair**) and **Crisis** point.



The **Climax** is that Scrooge isn't really dead, far from it, for he wakes up very much alive and kicking (**Reversal of Fortune**). Scrooge is now a changed man from what he was (**The Character Arc**), and furthermore, on waking up, he's born anew (**Rebirth**) – "I don't know how long I've been among the Spirits. I don't know anything*. I'm quite a baby*. Never mind. I don't care. *I'd rather be a baby*. Hallo! Whoop! Hallo here!"

Scrooge, Dickens tells us in the **Resolution**, ‘had no further intercourse with Spirits, in that respect, but lived upon the Total Abstinence Principle, ever afterwards; and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.’

By Steve Nallon



THE SWIDGERS