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McKee,

Story

PART 3

THE PRINCIPLES OF STORY DESIGN

When forced to work within a strict framework the imagination is taxed to its utmost—and will produce its richest ideas. Given total freedom the work is likely to sprawl.

—T. S. Eliot

7

THE SUBSTANCE OF STORY

From what material do we create the scenes that will one day walk and talk their way across the screen? What is the clay we twist and shape, keep or throw away? What is the "substance" of story?

In all other arts the answer is self-evident. The composer has his instrument and the notes it sounds. The dancer calls her body her instrument. Sculptors chisel stone. Painters stir paint. All artists can lay hands on the raw material of their art—except the writer. For at the nucleus of a story is a "substance," like the energy swirling in an atom, that's never *directly* seen, heard, or touched, yet we know it and feel it. The stuff of story is alive but intangible.

"Intangible?" I hear you thinking. "But I have my *words.* Dialogue, description. I can put hands on my pages. The writer's raw material is language." In fact, it's not, and the careers of many talented writers, especially those who come to screenwriting after a strong literary education, flounder because of the disastrous misunderstanding of this principle. For just as glass is a medium for light, air a medium for sound, language is only a medium, one of many, in fact, for storytelling. Something far more profound than mere words beats at the heart of a story.

And at the opposite end of story sits another equally profound phenomenon: the audience's reaction to this substance. When you think about it, going to the movies is bizarre. Hundreds of strangers sit in a blackened room, elbow to elbow, for two or more hours. They don't go to the toilet or get a smoke. Instead, they stare wide-eyed at a screen, investing more uninterrupted concentration than they give to work, paying money to suffer emotions they'd do anything to avoid in life. From this perspective, a second question arises: What is the source of story energy? How does it compel such intense mental and sentient attention from the audience? How do stories work?

The answers to these questions come when the artist explores the creative process *subjectively*. To understand the substance of story and how it performs, you need to view your work from the inside out, from the center of your character, looking *out* at the world through your character's eyes, experiencing the story as if you were the living character yourself. To slip into this subjective and highly imaginative point of view, you need to look closely at this creature you intend to inhabit, a *character*. Or more specifically, a *protagonist*. For although the protagonist is a character like any other, as the central and essential role, he embodies all aspects of character in absolute terms.

THE PROTAGONIST

Generally, the protagonist is a single character. A story, however, could be driven by a duo, such as THELMA & LOUISE; a trio, THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK; more, THE SEVEN SAMURAI or THE DIRTY DOZEN. In THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN an entire class of people, the proletariat, create a massive *Plural-Protagonist*.

For two or more characters to form a Plural-Protagonist, two conditions must be met: First, all individuals in the group share the same desire. Second, in the struggle to achieve this desire, they mutually suffer and benefit. If one has a success, all benefit. If one has a setback, all suffer. Within a Plural-Protagonist, motivation, action, and consequence are communal.

A story may, on the other hand, be *Multiprotagonist*. Here, unlike the Plural-Protagonist, characters pursue separate and individual desires, suffering and benefiting independently: PULP FICTION, HANNAH AND HER SISTERS, PARENTHOOD, DINER, DO THE RIGHT THING, THE BREAKFAST CLUB, EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN, PELLE THE CONQUEROR, HOPE AND GLORY, HIGH HOPES. Robert Altman is the master of this design: A WEDDING, NASHVILLE, SHORT CUTS.

On screen the Multiprotagonist story is as old as GRAND HOTEL; in the novel older still, *War and Peace*; in the theatre older yet, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Multiprotagonist stories become Multiplot stories. Rather than driving the telling through the focused desire of a protagonist, either single or plural, these works weave a number of smaller stories, each with its own protagonist, to create a dynamic portrait of a specific society.

The protagonist need not be human. It may be an animal, BABE, or a cartoon, BUGS BUNNY, or even an inanimate object, such as the hero of the children's story *The Little Engine That Could*. Anything that can be given a free will and the capacity to desire, take action, and suffer the consequences can be a protagonist.

It's even possible, in rare cases, to switch protagonists halfway through a story. PSYCHO does this, making the shower murder both an emotional and a formal jolt. With the protagonist dead, the audience is momentarily confused; whom is this movie about? The answer is a Plural-Protagonist as the victim's sister, boyfriend, and a private detective take over the story. But no matter whether the story's protagonist is single, multi or plural, no matter how he is characterized, all protagonists have certain hallmark qualities, and the first is *willpower*.

A PROTAGONIST is a willful character.

Other characters may be dogged, even inflexible, but the protagonist in particular is a willful being. The exact quantity of this willpower, however, may not be measurable. A fine story is not necessarily the struggle of a gigantic will versus absolute forces of inevitability. Quality of will is as important as quantity. A protagonist's willpower may be less than that of the biblical Job, but powerful enough to sustain desire through conflict and ultimately take actions that create meaningful and irreversible change.

What's more, the true strength of the protagonist's will may hide behind a passive characterization. Consider Blanche DuBois, protagonist of A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE. At first glance she seems weak, drifting and *will-less*, only wanting, she says, to live in reality. Yet beneath her frail characterization, Blanche's deep character owns a powerful will that drives her unconscious desire: What she really wants is *to escape from reality*. So Blanche does everything she can to buffer herself against the ugly world that engulfs her: She acts the grand dame, puts doilies on frayed furniture, lampshades on naked light bulbs, tries to make a Prince Charming out of a dullard. When none of this succeeds, she takes the final escape from reality—she goes insane.

On the other hand, while Blanche only seems passive, the truly passive protagonist is a regrettably common mistake. A story cannot be told about a protagonist who doesn't want anything, who cannot make decisions, whose actions effect no change at any level.

The PROTAGONIST has a conscious desire.

Rather, the protagonist's will impels a known desire. The protagonist has a need or goal, *an object of desire,* and knows it. If you could pull your protagonist aside, whisper in his ear, "What do you want?" he would have an answer: "I'd like X today, Y next week, but in the end I want Z." The protagonist's object of desire may be external: the destruction of the shark in JAWS, or internal: maturity in BIG. In either case, the protagonist knows what he wants, and for many characters a simple, clear, conscious desire is sufficient.

The PROTAGONIST may also have a self-contradictory unconscious desire.

However, the most memorable, fascinating characters tend to have not only a conscious but an unconscious desire. Although these complex protagonists are unaware of their subconscious need, the audience senses it, perceiving in them an inner contradiction. The conscious and unconscious desires of a multidimensional protagonist contradict each other. What he believes he wants is the antithesis of what he actually but unwittingly wants. This is self-evident. What would be the point of giving a character a subconscious desire if it happens to be the very thing he knowingly seeks?

The PROTAGONIST has the capacities to pursue the Object of Desire convincingly.

The protagonist's characterization must be appropriate. He needs a believable combination of qualities in the right balance to pursue his desires. This doesn't mean he'll get what he wants. He may fail. But the character's desires must be realistic enough in relationship to his will and capacities for the audience to believe that he could be doing what they see him doing and that he has a chance for fulfillment.

The PROTAGONIST must have at least a chance to attain his desire.

An audience has no patience for a protagonist who lacks all possibility of realizing his desire. The reason is simple: No one believes this of his own life. No one believes he doesn't have even the smallest chance of fulfilling his wishes. But if we were to pull the camera back on life, the grand overview might lead us to conclude that, in the words of Henry David Thoreau, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," that most people waste their precious time and die with the feeling they've fallen short of their dreams. As honest as this painful insight may be, we cannot allow ourselves to believe it. Instead, we carry hope to the end.

Hope, after all, is not unreasonable. It's simply hypothetical. "If this . . . if that . . . if I learn more . . . if I love more . . . if I discipline myself . . . if I win the lottery . . . if things change, then I'll have a chance of getting from life what I want." We all carry hope in our hearts, no matter the odds against us. A protagonist, therefore, who's literally hopeless, who hasn't even the minimal capacity to achieve his desire, cannot interest us.

The PROTAGONIST has the will and capacity to pursue the object of his conscious and/or unconscious desire to the end of the line, to the human limit established by setting and genre.

The art of story is not about the middle ground, but about the pendulum of existence swinging to the limits, about life lived in its most intense states. We explore the middle ranges of experience, but only as a path to the end of the line. The audience senses that limit and wants it reached. For no matter how intimate or epic the setting, instinctively the audience draws a circle around the characters and their world, a circumference of experience that's defined by the nature of the fictional reality. This line may reach inward to the soul, outward into the universe, or in both directions at once. The audience, therefore, expects the storyteller to be an artist of vision who can take his story to those distant depths and ranges.

A STORY must build to a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another.

In other words, a film cannot send its audience to the street rewriting it: "Happy ending . . . but shouldn't she have settled things with her father? Shouldn't she have broken up with Ed before she moved in with Mac? Shouldn't she have . . ." Or: "Downer . . . the guy's dead, but why didn't he call the cops? And didn't he keep a gun under the dash, and shouldn't he have . . . ?" If people exit imagining scenes they thought they should have seen before or after the ending we give them, they will be less than happy moviegoers. We're supposed to be better writers than they. The audience wants to be taken to the limit, to where all questions are answered, all emotion satisfied—the end of the line.

The protagonist takes us to this limit. He must have it within himself to pursue his desire to the boundaries of human experience in depth, breadth, or both, to reach absolute and irreversible change. This, by the way, doesn't mean your film can't have a sequel; your protagonist may have more tales to tell. It means that each story must find closure for itself.

The PROTAGONIST must be empathetic; he may or may not be sympathetic.

Sympathetic means likable. Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan, for example, or Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn in their typical roles: The moment they step onscreen, we like them. We'd want them as friends, family members, or lovers. They have an innate likability and evoke sympathy. Empathy, however, is a more profound response.

Empathetic means "like me." Deep within the protagonist the audience recognizes a certain shared humanity. Character and audience are not alike in every fashion, of course; they may share only a single quality. But there's something about the character that strikes a chord. In that moment of recognition, the audience suddenly and instinctively wants the protagonist to achieve whatever it is that he desires.

The unconscious logic of the audience runs like this: "This character is like me. Therefore, I want him to have whatever it is he wants, because if I were he in those circumstances, I'd want the same thing for myself." Hollywood has many synonymic expressions for this connection: "somebody to get behind," "someone to root for." All describe the empathetic connection that the audience strikes between itself and the protagonist. An audience may, if so moved, empathize with every character in your film, but it must empathize with your protagonist. If not, the audience/story bond is broken.

THE AUDIENCE BOND

The audience's emotional involvement is held by the glue of empathy. If the writer fails to fuse a bond between filmgoer and protagonist, we sit outside feeling nothing. Involvement has nothing to do with evoking altruism or compassion. We empathize for very personal, if not egocentric, reasons. When we identify with a protagonist and his desires in life, we are in fact rooting for our own desires in life. Through empathy, the vicarious linking of ourselves to a fictional human being, we test and stretch our humanity. The gift of story is the opportunity to live lives beyond our own, to desire and struggle in a myriad of worlds and times, at all the various depths of our being.

Empathy, therefore, is absolute, while sympathy is optional. We've all met likable people who don't draw our compassion. A protagonist, accordingly, may or may not be pleasant. Unaware of the difference between sympathy and empathy, some writers automatically devise nice-guy heroes, fearing that if the star role isn't nice, the audience won't relate. Uncountable commercial disasters, however, have starred charming protagonists. Likability is no guarantee of audience involvement; it's merely an aspect of characterization. The audience identifies with deep character, with innate qualities revealed through choice under pressure.

At first glance creating empathy does not seem difficult. The protagonist is a human being; the audience is full of human beings. As the filmgoer looks up on the screen, he recognizes the character's humanity, senses that he shares it, identifies with the protagonist, and dives into the story. Indeed, in the hands of the greatest writers, even the most unsympathetic character can be made empathetic.

Macbeth, for example, viewed objectively, is monstrous. He butchers a kindly old King while the man is sleeping, a King who had never done Macbeth any harm—in fact, that very day he'd given Macbeth a royal promotion. Macbeth then murders two servants of the King to blame the deed on them. He kills his best friend. Finally he orders the assassination of the wife and infant children of his enemy. He's a ruthless killer; yet, in Shakespeare's hands he becomes a tragic, empathetic hero.

The Bard accomplished this feat by giving Macbeth a conscience. As he wanders in soliloquy, wondering, agonizing, "Why am I doing this? What kind of a man am I?" the audience listens and thinks, "What kind? Guilt-ridden . . . just like me. I feel bad when I'm thinking about doing bad things. I feel awful when I do them and afterward there's no end to the guilt. Macbeth is a human being; he has a conscience just like mine." In fact, we're so drawn to Macbeth's writhing soul, we feel a tragic loss when at climax Macduff decapitates him. *Macbeth* is a breathtaking display of the godlike power of the writer to find an empathetic center in an otherwise contemptible character.

On the other hand, in recent years many films, despite otherwise splendid qualities, have crashed on these rocks because they failed to create an audience bond. Just one example of many: INTERVIEW WITH A VAMPIRE. The audience's reaction to Brad Pitt's Louis went like this: "If I were Louis, caught in his hell-after-death, I'd end it in a flash. Bad luck he's a vampire. Wouldn't wish that on anybody. But if he finds it revolting to suck the life out of innocent victims, if he hates himself for turning a child into a devil, if he's tired of rat blood, he should take this simple solution: Wait for sunrise, and poof, it's over." Although Anne Rice's novel steered us through Louis's thoughts and feelings until we fell into empathy with him, the dispassionate eye of the camera sees him for what he is, a whining fraud. Audiences always disassociate themselves from hypocrites.

THE FIRST STEP

When you sit down to write, the musing begins: "How to start? What would my character do?"

Your character, indeed all characters, in the pursuit of any desire, at any moment in story, will always take the minimum, conservative action *from his point of view*. All human beings always do. Humanity is fundamentally conservative, as indeed is all of nature. No organism ever expends more energy than necessary, risks anything it doesn't have to, or takes any action unless it must. Why should it? If a task can be done in an easy way without risk of loss or pain, or the expenditure of energy, why would any creature do the more difficult, dangerous, or enervating thing? It won't. Nature doesn't allow it . . . and human nature is just an aspect of universal nature.

In life we often see people, even animals, acting with extreme behavior that seems unnecessary, if not stupid. But this is our objective view of their situation. Subjectively, from within the experience of the creature, this apparently intemperate action was minimal, conservative, and necessary. What's thought "conservative," after all, is always relative to point of view.

For example: If a normal person wanted to get into a house, he'd take the minimum and conservative action. He'd knock on the door, thinking, "If I knock, the door'll be opened. I'll be invited in and that'll be a positive step toward my desire." A martial arts hero, however, as a conservative first step, might karate-chop the door to splinters, feeling that this is prudent and minimal.

What is necessary but minimal and conservative is relative to the point of view of each character at each precise moment. In life, for example, I say to myself: "If I cross the street now, that car's far enough away for the driver to see me in time, slow down if needed, and I'll get across." Or: "I can't find Dolores's phone number. But I know that my friend Jack has it in his Rolodex. If I call him in the midst of his busy day, because he's my friend, he'll interrupt what he's doing and give me the number."

In other words, in life we take an action consciously or unconsciously (and life is spontaneous most of the time as we open our mouths or take a step), thinking or sensing within to this effect: "If in these circumstances I take this minimum, conservative action, the world will react to me in a fashion that will be a positive step toward getting me what I want." And in life, 99 percent of the time we are right. The driver sees you in time, taps the brakes, and you reach the other side safely. You call Jack and apologize for interrupting him. He says, "No problem," and gives you the number. This is the great mass of experience, hour by hour, in life. BUT NEVER, EVER IN A STORY.

The grand difference between story and life is that in story we cast out the minutiae of daily existence in which human beings take actions expecting a certain enabling reaction from the world, and, more or less, get what they expect.

In story, we concentrate on that moment, and only that moment, in which a character takes an action expecting a useful reaction from his world, but instead the effect of his action is to provoke forces of antagonism. The world of the character reacts differently than expected, more powerfully than expected, or both.

I pick up the phone, call Jack, and say: "Sorry to bother you, but I can't find Dolores's phone number. Could you—" and he shouts: "Dolores? Dolores! How dare you ask me for her number?" and slams down the phone. Suddenly, life is interesting.

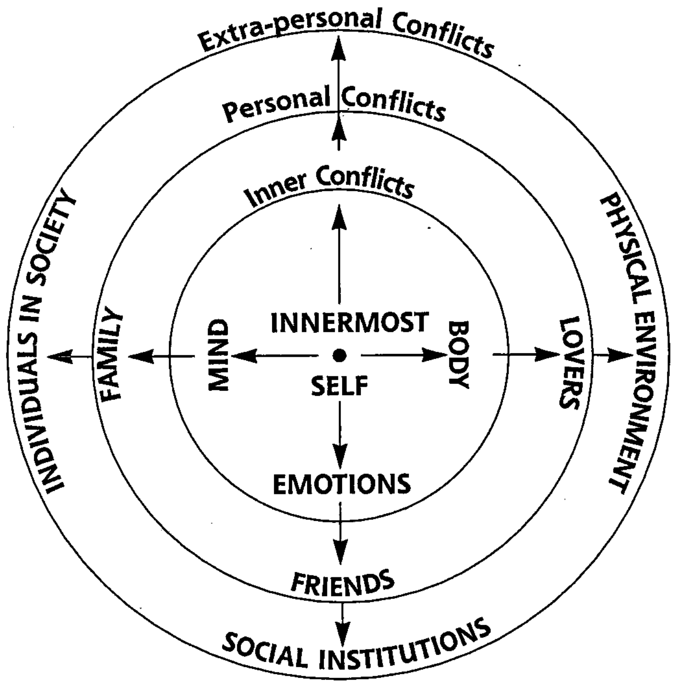
THE WORLD OF A CHARACTER

This chapter seeks the substance of story as seen from the perspective of a writer who in his imagination has placed himself at the very center of the character he's creating. The "center" of a human being, that irreducible particularity of the innermost self, is the awareness you carry with you twenty-four hours a day that watches you do everything you do, that chides you when you get things wrong, or compliments you on those rare occasions when you get things right. It's that deep observer that comes to you when you're going through the most agonizing experience of your life, collapsed on the floor, crying your heart out . . . that little voice that says, "Your mascara is running." This inner eye is you: your identity, your ego, the conscious focus of your being. Everything outside this subjective core is the objective world of a character.

A character's world can be imagined as a series of concentric circles surrounding a core of raw identity or awareness, circles that mark the levels of conflict in a character's life. The inner circle or level is his own self and conflicts arising from the elements of his nature: mind, body, emotion.

When, for example, a character takes an action, his mind may not react the way he anticipates. His thoughts may not be as quick, as insightful, as witty as he expected. His body may not react as he imagined. It may not be strong enough or deft enough for a particular task. And we all know how emotions betray us. So the closest circle of antagonism in the world of a character is his own being: feelings and emotions, mind and body, all or any of which may or may not react from one moment to the next the way he expects. As often as not, we are our own worst enemies.

THE THREE LEVELS OF CONFLICT


Extra-personal Conflicts
Personal Conflicts
Inner Conflicts
INNERMOST
SELF
MIND
BODY
EMOTIONS
FAMILY
LOVERS
FRIENDS
INDIVIDUALS IN SOCIETY
PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT
SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

The second circle inscribes personal relationships, unions of intimacy deeper than the social role. Social convention assigns the outer roles we play. At the moment, for example, we're playing teacher/student. Someday, however, our paths may cross and we may decide to change our professional relationship to friendship. In the same manner, parent/child begins as social roles that may or may not go deeper than that. Many of us go through life in parent/child relationships that never deepen beyond social definitions of authority and rebellion. Not until we set the conventional role aside do we find the true intimacy of family, friends, and lovers—who then do not react the way we expect and become the second level of personal conflict.

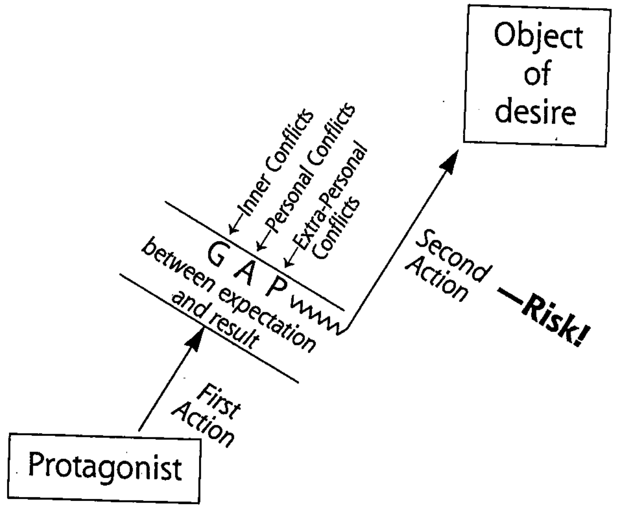
The third circle marks the level of extra-personal conflict—all the sources of antagonism outside the personal: conflict with social institutions and individuals—government/citizen, church/worshipper; corporation/client; conflict with individuals—cop/criminal/victim, boss/worker, customer/waiter, doctor/patient; and conflict with both man-made and natural environments—time, space, and every object in it.

Doctors [illegible]
Parents [illegible] Religious
[illegible]

THE GAP

STORY is born in that place where the subjective and objective realms touch.

The protagonist seeks an object of desire beyond his reach. Consciously or unconsciously he chooses to take a particular action, motivated by the thought or feeling that this act will cause the world to react in a way that will be a positive step toward achieving his desire. From his subjective point of view the action he has chosen seems minimal, conservative, yet sufficient to effect the reaction he wants. But the moment he takes this action, the objective realm of his inner life, personal relationships, or extra-personal world, or a combination of these, react in a way that's more powerful or different than he expected.


Object of desire
Inner Conflicts
Personal Conflicts
Extra-Personal Conflicts
GAP
between expectation and result
Second Action
—Risk!
First Action
Protagonist

This reaction from his world blocks his desire, thwarting him and bending him further from his desire than he was before he took this action. Rather than evoking cooperation from his world, his action provokes forces of antagonism that open up the *gap* between his subjective expectation and the objective result, between what he thought would happen when he took his action and what in fact does happen between his sense of probability and true necessity.

Every human being acts, from one moment to the next, knowingly or unknowingly, on his sense of probability, on what he expects, in all likelihood, to happen when he takes an action. We all walk this earth thinking, or at least hoping, that we understand ourselves, our intimates, society, and the world. We behave according to what we believe to be the truth of ourselves, the people around us, and the environment. But this is a truth we cannot know absolutely. It's what we *believe* to be true.

We also believe we're free to make any decision whatsoever to take any action whatsoever. But every choice and action we make and take, spontaneous or deliberate, is rooted in the sum total of our experience, in what has happened to us in actuality, imagination, or dream to that moment. We then choose to act based on what this gathering of life tells us will be the probable reaction from our world. It's only then, when we take action, that we discover necessity.

Necessity is absolute truth. Necessity is what in fact happens when we act. This truth is known—*and can only be known*—when we take action into the depth and breadth of our world and brave its reaction. This reaction is the truth of our existence at that precise moment, no matter what we believed the moment before. Necessity is what must and does actually happen, as opposed to probability, which is what we hope or expect to happen.

As in life, so in fiction. When objective necessity contradicts a character's sense of probability, a gap suddenly cracks open in the fictional reality. This gap is the point where the subjective and objective realms collide, the difference between anticipation and result, between the world as the character perceived it before acting and the truth he discovers in action.

Once the gap in reality splits open, the character, being willful and having capacity, senses or realizes that he cannot get what he wants in a minimal, conservative way. He must gather himself and struggle through this gap to take a second action. This next action is something the character would not have wanted to do in the first case because it not only demands more willpower and forces him to dig more deeply into his human capacity, but most important, *the second action puts him at risk.* He now stands to lose in order to gain.

ON RISK

We'd all like to have our cake and eat it too. In a state of jeopardy, on the other hand, we must risk something that we want or have in order to gain something else that we want or to protect something we have—a dilemma we strive to avoid.

Here's a simple test to apply to any story. Ask: What is the risk? What does the protagonist stand to lose if he does not get what he wants? More specifically, what's the worst thing that will happen to the protagonist if he does not achieve his desire?

If this question cannot be answered in a compelling way, the story is misconceived at its core. For example, if the answer is: "Should the protagonist fail, life would go back to normal," this story is not worth telling. What the protagonist wants is of no real value, and a story of someone pursuing something of little or no value is the definition of boredom.

Life teaches that the measure of the value of any human desire is in direct proportion to the risk involved in its pursuit. The higher the value, the higher the risk. We give the ultimate values to those things that demand the ultimate risks—our freedom, our lives, our souls. This imperative of risk, however, is far more than an aesthetic principle, it's rooted in the deepest source of our art. For we not only create stories as metaphors for life, we create them as metaphors for meaningful life—and to live meaningfully is to be at perpetual risk.

Examine your own desires. What's true of you will be true of every character you write. You wish to write for the cinema, the foremost media of creative expression in the world today; you wish to give us works of beauty and meaning that help shape our vision of reality; in return you would like to be acknowledged. It's a noble ambition and a grand achievement to fulfill. And because you're a serious artist, you're willing to risk vital aspects of your life to live that dream.

You're willing to risk time. You know that even the most talented writers—Oliver Stone, Lawrence Kasdan, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala—didn't find success until they were in their thirties or forties, and just as it takes a decade or more to make a good doctor or teacher, it takes ten or more years of adult life to find something to say that tens of millions of people want to hear, and ten or more years and often as many screenplays written and unsold to master this demanding craft.

You're willing to risk money. You know that if you were to take the same hard work and creativity that goes into a decade of unsold screenplays and apply it to a normal profession, you could retire before you see your first script on the screen.

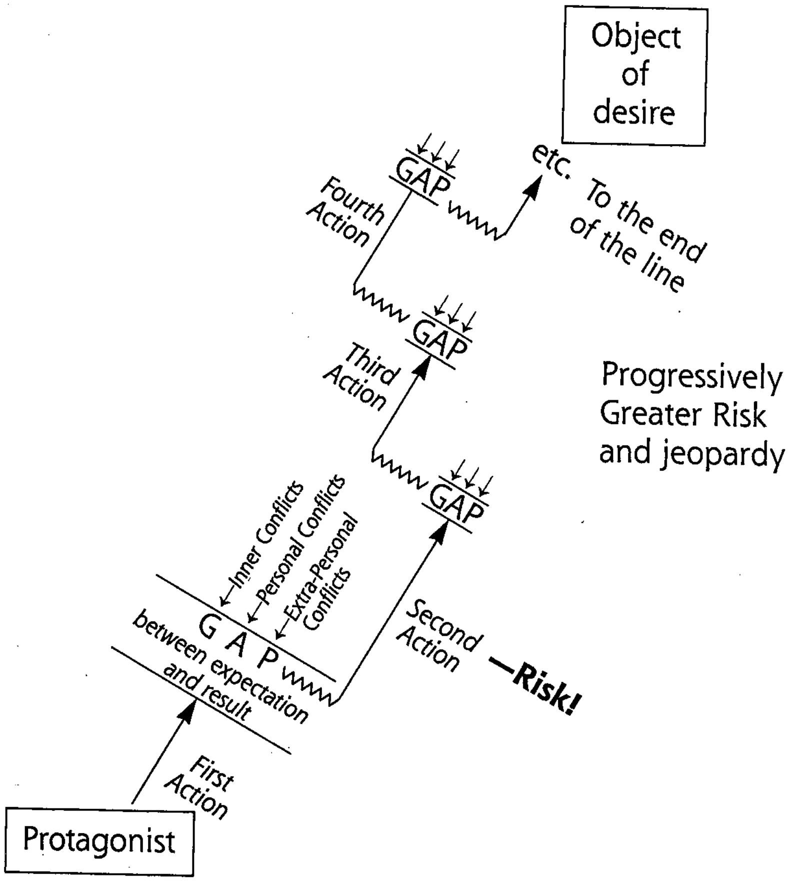
You're willing to risk people. Each morning you go to your desk and enter the imagined world of your characters. You dream and write until the sun's setting and your head's throbbing. So you turn off your word processor to be with the person you love. Except that, while you can turn off your machine, you can't turn off your imagination. As you sit at dinner, your characters are still running through your head and you're wishing there was a notepad next to your plate. Sooner or later, the person you love will say: "You know . . . you're not really here." Which is true. Half the time you're somewhere else, and no one wants to live with somebody who isn't really there.

The writer places time, money, and people at risk because his ambition has life-defining force. What's true for the writer is true for every character he creates:

> **The measure of the value of a character's desire is in direct proportion to the risk he's willing to take to achieve it; the greater the value, the greater the risk.**

THE GAP IN PROGRESSION

The protagonist's first action has aroused forces of antagonism that block his desire and spring open a gap between anticipation and result, disconfirming his notions of reality, putting him in greater conflict with his world, at even greater risk. But the resilient human mind quickly remakes reality into a larger pattern that incorporates this disconfirmation, this unexpected reaction. Now he takes a second, more difficult and risk-taking action, an action consistent with his revised vision of reality, an action based on his new expectations of the world. But again his action provokes forces



of antagonism, splitting open a gap in his reality. So he adjusts to the unexpected, ups the ante yet again and decides to take an action that he feels is consistent with his amended sense of things. He reaches even more deeply into his capacities and willpower, puts himself at greater risk, and takes a third action.

Perhaps this action achieves a positive result, and for the moment he takes a step toward his desire, but with his next action, the gap will again spring open. Now he must take an even more difficult action that demands even more willpower, more capacity, and more risk. Over and over again in a progression, rather than cooperation, his actions provoke forces of antagonism, opening gaps in his reality. This pattern repeats on various levels to the end of the line, to a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another.

These cracks in moment-to-moment reality mark the difference between the dramatic and the prosaic, between action and activity. True action is physical, vocal, or mental movement that opens gaps in expectation and creates significant change. Mere activity is behavior in which what is expected happens, generating either no change or trivial change.

But the gap between expectation and result is far more than a matter of cause and effect. In the most profound sense, the break between the cause as it seemed and the effect as it turns out marks the point where the human spirit and the world meet. On one side is the world as we believe it to be, on the other is reality as it actually is. In this gap is the nexus of story, the caldron that cooks our tellings. Here the writer finds the most powerful, life-bending moments. The only way we can reach this crucial junction is by working from the inside out.

WRITING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Why must we do this? Why during the creation of a scene must we find our way to the center of each character and experience it from his point of view? What do we gain when we do? What do we sacrifice if we don't?

Like anthropologists, we could, for example, discover social and environmental truths through careful observations. Like note-taking psychologists, we could find behavioral truths. We could, by working from the outside in, render a surface of character that's genuine, even fascinating. But the one crucial dimension we would not create is *emotional truth.*

The only reliable source of emotional truth is yourself. If you stay outside your characters, you inevitably write emotional clichés. To create revealing human reactions, you must not only get inside your character, but get inside yourself. So, how to do this? How, as you sit at your desk, do you crawl inside the head of your character to feel your heart pounding, your palms sweating, a knot in your belly, tears in your eyes, laughter in your heart, sexual arousal, anger, outrage, compassion, sadness, joy, or any of the uncountable responses along the spectrum of human emotions?

You've determined that a certain event must take place in your story, a situation to be progressed and turned. How to write a scene of insightful emotions? You could ask: How *should* someone take this action? But that leads to clichés and moralizing. Or you could ask: How *might* someone do this? But that leads to writing "cute"—clever but dishonest. Or: "If my character were in these circumstances, what would he do?" But that puts you at a distance, picturing your character walking the stage of his life, guessing at his emotions, and guesses are invariably clichés. Or you could ask: "If I were in these circumstances, what would I do?" As this question plays on your imagination, it may start your heart pounding, but obviously you're not the character. Although it may be an honest emotion for you, your character might do the reverse. So what do you do?

You ask: "If I were this character in these circumstances, what would I do?" Using Stanislavski's "Magic if," you act the role. It is no accident that many of the greatest playwrights from Euripides to Shakespeare to Pinter, and screenwriters from D. W. Griffith to Ruth Gordon to John Sayles were also actors. Writers are improvisationalists who perform sitting at their word processors, pacing their rooms, acting all their characters: man, woman, child, monster. We act in our imaginations until honest, character-specific bound parasitical insects, or remembered the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* in which the blood of Grendel the water monster burns through the hero's shield, or it came to him in a nightmare. Whether through investigation, imagination, or memory, O'Bannon's alien is a stunning creation.

All the artists making ALIEN—writer, director, designers, actors—worked to the limit of their talents to create an authentic world. They knew that believability is the key to terror. Indeed, if the audience is to feel *any* emotion, it must believe. For when a film's emotional load becomes too sad, too horrifying, even too funny, how do we try to escape? We say to ourselves: "It's only a movie." We deny its authenticity. But if the film's of quality, the second we glance back at the screen, we're grabbed by the throat and pulled right back into those emotions. We won't escape until the film lets us out, which is what we paid our money for in the first place.

Authenticity depends on the "telling detail." When we use a few selected details, the audience's imagination supplies the rest, completing a credible whole. On the other hand, if the writer and director try too hard to be "real"—especially with sex and violence—the audience reaction is: "That's not really real," or "My God, that's so real," or "They're not really fucking," or "My God, they're really fucking." In either case, credibility shatters as the audience is yanked out of the story to notice the filmmaker's technique. An audience believes as long as we don't give them reason to doubt.

Beyond physical and social detail, we must also create emotional authenticity. Authorial research must pay off in believable character behavior. Beyond behavioral credibility, the story itself must persuade. From event to event, cause and effect must be convincing, logical. The art of story design lies in the fine adjustment of things both usual and unusual to things universal and archetypal. The writer whose knowledge of subject has taught him exactly what to stress and expand versus what to lay down quietly and subtly will stand out from the thousands of others who always hit the same note.

Originality lies in the struggle for authenticity, not eccentricity. A personal style, in other words, cannot be achieved self-consciously.

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other linear, one ironic, the other compassionate. The unique story styles of each is the natural and spontaneous effect of an author mastering his subject in the never-ending battle against clichés.

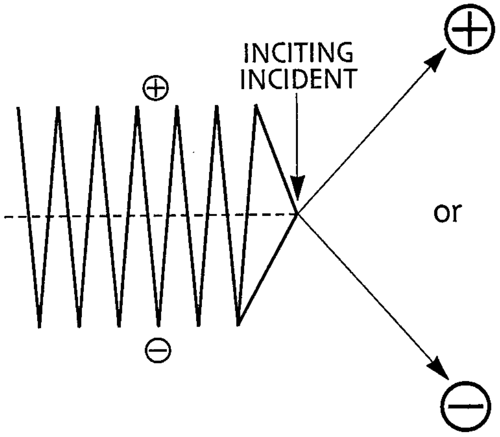
THE INCITING INCIDENT

Starting from any Premise at any point in the story's chronology, our research feeds the invention of events, the events redirect research. We do not, in other words, necessarily design a story by beginning with its first major event. But at some point as you create your universe, you'll face these questions: How do I set my story into action? Where do I place this crucial event?

When an Inciting Incident occurs it must be a dynamic, fully developed event, not something static or vague. This, for example, is not an Inciting Incident: A college dropout lives off-campus near New York University. She wakes one morning and says: "I'm bored with my life. I think I'll move to Los Angeles." She packs her VW and motors west, but her change of address changes nothing of value in her life. She's merely exporting her apathy from New York to California.

If, on the other hand, we notice that she's created an ingenious kitchen wallpaper from hundreds of parking tickets, then a sudden POUNDING on the door brings the police, brandishing a felony warrant for ten thousand dollars in unpaid citations, and she flees down the fire escape, heading West—this could be an Inciting Incident. It has done what an Inciting Incident must do.

The INCITING INCIDENT radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist's life.



As a story begins, the protagonist is living a life that's more or less in balance. He has successes and failures, ups and downs. Who doesn't? But life is in relative control. Then, perhaps suddenly but in any case decisively, an event occurs that radically upsets its balance, swinging the value-charge of the protagonist's reality either to the negative or to the positive.

Negative: Our dropout reaches L.A., but she balks at taking a normal job when she's asked for her social security number. Fearful that in a computerized world the Manhattan police will track her down through the Internal Revenue Service, what does she do? Go underground? Sell drugs? Turn to prostitution?

Positive: Perhaps the knock at the door is an heir hunter with news of a million-dollar fortune left by an anonymous relative. Suddenly rich, she's under terrible pressure. With no more excuses for failure, she has a heart-thumping fear of screwing up this dream come true.

In most cases, the Inciting Incident is a single event that either happens directly to the protagonist or is caused by the protagonist. Consequently, he's immediately aware that life is out of balance for better or worse. When lovers first meet, this face-to-face event turns life, for the moment, to the positive. When Jeffrey abandons the security of his Davenport family for Hollywood, he knowingly puts himself at risk.

Occasionally, an Inciting Incident needs two events: a setup and a payoff. JAWS: Setup, a shark eats a swimmer and her body washes onto the beach. Payoff, the sheriff (Roy Scheider) discovers the corpse. If the logic of an Inciting Incident requires a setup, the writer cannot delay the payoff—at least not for very long—and keep the protagonist ignorant of the fact that his life is out of balance. Imagine JAWS with this design: Shark eats girl, followed by sheriff goes bowling, gives out parking tickets, makes love to his wife, goes to PTA meeting, visits his sick mother . . . while the corpse rots on the beach. A story is not a sandwich of episodic slices of life between two halves of an Inciting Incident.

Consider the unfortunate design of THE RIVER: The film opens with the first half of an Inciting Incident: a businessman, Joe Wade (Scott Glenn) decides to build a dam across a river, knowing he'll flood five farms in the process. One of these belongs to Tom and Mae Garvey (Mel Gibson and Sissy Spacek). No one, however, tells Tom or Mae. So for the next hundred minutes we watch: Tom plays baseball, Tom and Mae struggle to make the farm turn a profit, Tom goes to work in a factory caught up in a labor dispute, Mae breaks her arm in a tractor accident, Joe makes romantic passes at Mae, Mae goes to the factory to visit her husband who's now a scab locked in the factory, a stressed-out Tom fails to get it up, Mae whispers a gentle word, Tom gets it up, and so on.

Ten minutes from its end, the film delivers the second half of the Inciting Incident: Tom stumbles into Joe's office, sees a model of the dam, and says, in effect: "If you build that dam, Joe, you'll flood my farm." Joe shrugs. Then, deus ex machina, it starts to rain and the river rises. Tom and his buddies get their bulldozers to shore up the levee; Joe gets his bulldozer and goons to tear down the levee. Tom and Joe have a bulldozer-to-bulldozer Mexican standoff. At this point, Joe steps back and declares that he didn't want to build the dam in the first place. FADE OUT.

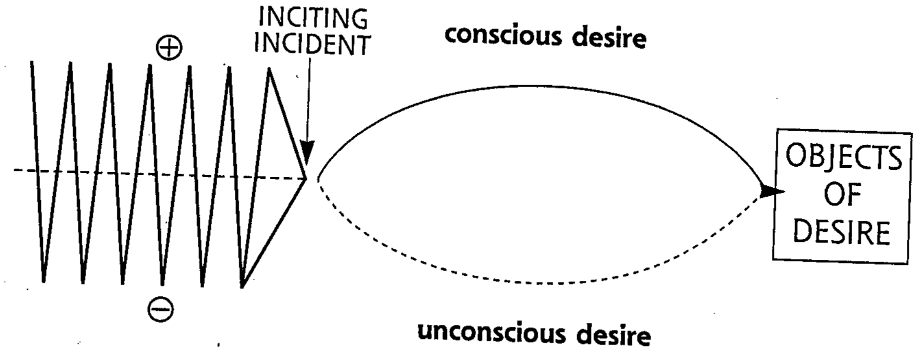
The protagonist must react to the Inciting Incident.

Given the infinitely variable nature of protagonists, however, any reaction is possible. For example, how many Westerns began like this? Bad guys shoot up the town and kill the old marshal. Townspeople gather and go down to the livery stable, run by Matt, a retired gunslinger who's sworn a sacred oath never to kill again. The mayor pleads: "Matt, you've got to pin on the badge and come to our aid. You're the only one that can do it." Matt replies: "No, no, I hung up my guns long ago." "But, Matt," begs the schoolmarm, "they killed your mother." Matt toes the dirt and says: "Well . . . she was old and I guess her time had come." He refuses to act, but that is a reaction.

The protagonist responds to the sudden negative or positive change in the balance of life in whatever way is appropriate to character and world. A refusal to act, however, cannot last for very long, even in the most passive protagonists of minimalist Nonplots. For we all wish some reasonable sovereignty over our existence, and if an event radically upsets our sense of equilibrium and control, what would we want? What does anyone, including our protagonist, want? To restore balance.

Therefore, the Inciting Incident first throws the protagonist's life out of balance, then arouses in him the desire to restore that balance. Out of this need—often quickly, occasionally with deliberation—the protagonist next conceives of an Object of Desire: something physical or situational or attitudinal that he feels he lacks or needs to put the ship of life on an even keel. Lastly, the Inciting Incident propels the protagonist into an active pursuit of this object or goal. And for many stories or genres this is sufficient: An event pitches the protagonist's life out of kilter, arousing a conscious desire for something he feels will set things right, and he goes after it.

But 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 desires 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.



CARNAL KNOWLEDGE: If we were to pull the protagonist Jonathan (Jack Nicholson) aside and ask him "What do you want?" his conscious answer would be: "I'm a good-looking guy, lot of fun to be with, make a terrific living as a CPA. My life would be paradise if I could find the perfect woman to share it." The film takes Jonathan from his college years to middle age, a thirty-year search for his dream woman. Again and again he meets a beautiful, intelligent woman, but soon their candlelit romance turns to dark emotions, acts of physical violence, then breakup. Over and over he plays the great romantic until he has a woman head over heels in love with him, then he turns on her, humiliates her, and hurls her out of his life.

At Climax, he invites Sandy (Art Garfunkel), an old college buddy, for dinner. For amusement he screens 35mm slides of all the women from his life; a show he entitles "Ballbusters on Parade." As each woman appears, he trashes her to Sandy for "what was wrong with her." In the Resolution scene, he's with a prostitute (Rita Moreno) who has to read him an ode he's written in praise of his penis so he can get it up. He thinks he's hunting for the perfect woman, but we know that unconsciously he wants to degrade and destroy women and has done that throughout his life. Jules Feiffer's screenplay is a chilling delineation of a man that too many women know only too well.

MRS. SOFFEL: In 1901 a thief (Mel Gibson) who's committed murder awaits execution. The wife of the prison warden (Diane Keaton) decides to save his soul for God. She reads Bible quotations to him, hoping that when he's hanged he'll go to heaven and not hell.

They are attracted. She engineers his jailbreak, then joins him. On the run they make love, but only once. As the authorities close in, she realizes he's about to die and decides to die with him: "Shoot me," she begs him, "I don't want to live a day beyond you." He pulls the trigger but only wounds her. In the Resolution, she's imprisoned for life, but goes into her cell proudly, virtually spitting in the eye of her jailer.

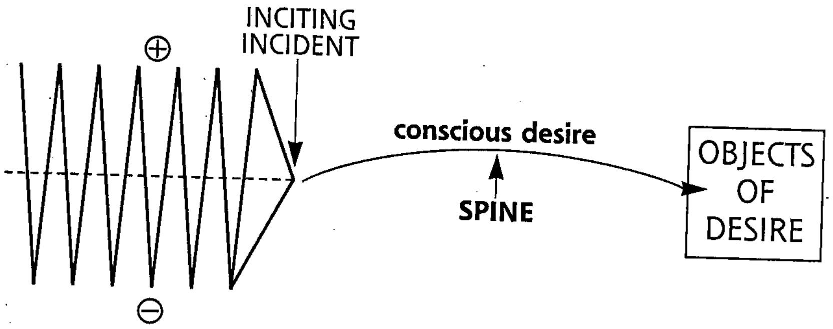
Mrs. Soffel seems to flit from choice to choice, but we sense that underneath her changes of mind is the powerful unconscious desire for a transcendent, absolute, romantic experience of such intensity that if nothing ever happened to her again it wouldn't matter . . . because for one sublime moment she will have lived. Mrs. Soffel is the ultimate romantic.

THE CRYING GAME: Fergus (Stephen Rea), a member of the Irish Republican Army, is put in charge of a British corporal (Forest Whitaker) held prisoner by his IRA unit. He finds himself in sympathy with the man's plight. When the corporal is killed, Fergus goes AWOL to England, hiding out from both the British and the IRA. He looks up the corporal's lover, Dil (Jaye Davidson). He falls in love, only to discover that Dil's a transvestite. The IRA then tracks him down. Fergus volunteered for the IRA knowing it isn't a college fraternity, so when they order him to assassinate an English judge, he must finally come to terms with his politics. Is he or is he not an Irish patriot?

Beneath Fergus's conscious political struggle, the audience senses from his first moments with the prisoner to his last tender scenes with Dil that this film isn't about his commitment to the cause. Hidden behind his zigzag politics Fergus harbors the most human of needs: to love and be loved.

THE SPINE OF THE STORY

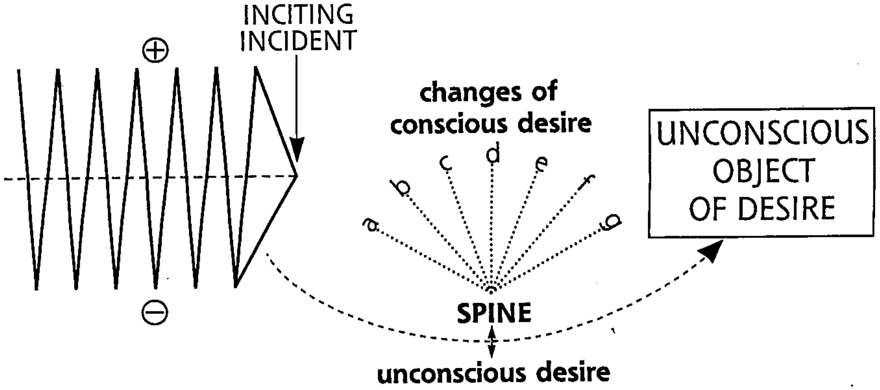
The energy of a protagonist's desire forms the critical element of design known as the *Spine* of the story (AKA *Through-line* or *Super-objective*). The Spine is the deep desire in and effort by the protagonist to restore the balance of life. It's the primary unifying force that holds all other story elements together. For no matter what happens on the surface of the story, each scene, image, and word is ultimately an aspect of the Spine, relating, causally or thematically, to this core of desire and action.



If the protagonist has no unconscious desire, then his conscious objective becomes the Spine. The Spine of any Bond film, for example, can be phrased as: *To defeat the arch-villain.* James has no unconscious desires; he wants and only wants to save the world. As the story's unifying force, Bond's pursuit of his conscious goal cannot change. If he were to declare, "To hell with Dr. No. I'm bored with the spy business. I'm going south to work on my backswing and lower my handicap," the film falls apart.

If, on the other hand, the protagonist has an unconscious desire, this becomes the Spine of the story. An unconscious desire is always more powerful and durable, with roots reaching to the protagonist's innermost self. When an unconscious desire drives the story, it allows the writer to create a far more complex character who may repeatedly change his conscious desire.

MOBY DICK: If Melville had made Ahab sole protagonist, his novel would be a simple but exciting work of *High Adventure*, driven by the captain's monomania to destroy the white whale. But by adding Ishmael as dual protagonist, Melville enriched his story into a complex classic of the *Education Plot*. For the telling is in fact driven by Ishmael's unconscious desire to battle inner demons, seeking in himself the destructive obsessions he sees in Ahab—a desire that not only contradicts his conscious hope to survive Ahab's mad voyage, but may destroy him as it does Ahab.


INCITING INCIDENT
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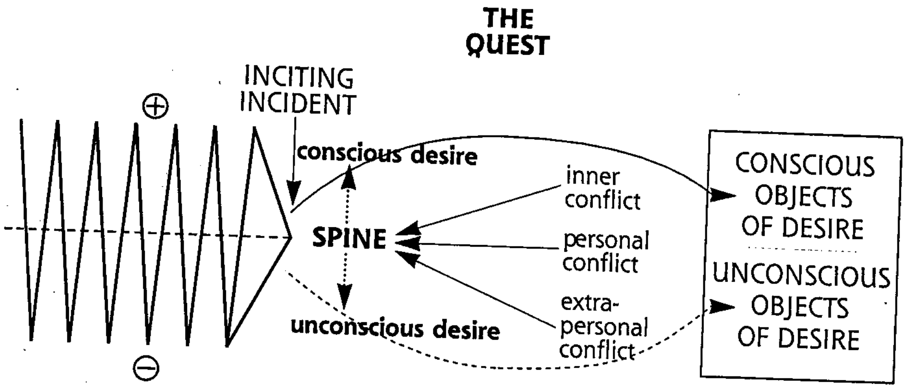
UNCONSCIOUS OBJECT OF DESIRE
SPINE
unconscious desire

In THE CRYING GAME Fergus agonizes over politics while his unconscious need *to love and be loved* drives the telling. Jonathan searches for the "perfect woman" in CARNAL KNOWLEDGE, flitting from relationship to relationship, while his unconscious desire *to humiliate and destroy women* never varies. The leaps of desire in Mrs. Soffel's mind are enormous—from salvation to damnation—while unconsciously she seeks *to experience the transcendent romance.* The audience senses that the shifting urges of the complex protagonist are merely reflections of the one thing that never changes: the unconscious desire.

THE QUEST

From the point of view of the writer looking from the Inciting Incident "down the Spine" to the last act's Climax, in spite of all we've said about genres and the various shapes from Archplot to Antiplot, in truth there's only one story. In essence we have told one another the same tale, one way or another, since the dawn of humanity, and that story could be usefully called *the Quest.* All stories take the form of a Quest.

For better or worse, an event throws a character's life out of balance, arousing in him the conscious and/or unconscious desire for that which he feels will restore balance, launching him on a Quest for his Object of Desire against forces of antagonism (inner, personal, extra-personal). He may or may not achieve it. This is story in a nutshell.


THE QUEST
INCITING INCIDENT
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conscious desire
SPINE
unconscious desire
inner conflict
personal conflict
extra-personal conflict
CONSCIOUS OBJECTS OF DESIRE
UNCONSCIOUS OBJECTS OF DESIRE

The essential form of story is simple. But that's like saying that the essential form of music is simple. It is. It's twelve notes. But these twelve notes conspire into everything and anything we have ever called music. The essential elements of the Quest are the twelve notes of our music, the melody we've listened to all our lives. However, like the composer sitting down at the piano, when a writer takes up this seemingly simple form, he discovers how incredibly complex it is, how inordinately difficult to do.

To understand the Quest form of your story you need only identify your protagonist's Object of Desire. Penetrate his psychology and find an honest answer to the question: "What does he want?" It may be the desire for something he can take into his arms: *someone to love* in MOONSTRUCK. It may be the need for inner growth: *maturity* in BIG. But whether a profound change in the real world—*security from a marauding shark* in JAWS—or a profound change in the spiritual realm—*a meaningful life* in TENDER MERCIES—by looking into the heart of the protagonist and discovering his desire, you begin to see the arc of your story, the Quest on which the Inciting Incident sends him.

DESIGN OF THE INCITING INCIDENT

An Inciting Incident happens in only one of two ways: randomly or causally, either by coincidence or by decision. If by decision, it can be made by the protagonist—Ben's decision to drink himself to death in LEAVING LAS VEGAS, or, as in KRAMER vs. KRAMER, by someone with the power to upset the protagonist's life—Mrs. Kramer's decision to leave Mr. Kramer and their child. If by coincidence, it may be tragic—the accident that kills Alice's husband in ALICE DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE, or serendipitous—a sports promoter meets beautiful and gifted athlete in PAT AND MIKE. By choice or accident; there are no other means.

The Inciting Incident of the Central Plot must happen onscreen—not in the Backstory, not between scenes offscreen. Each subplot has its own Inciting Incident, which may or may not be onscreen, but the presence of the audience at the Central Plot's Inciting Incident is crucial to story design for two reasons.

First, when the audience experiences an Inciting Incident, the film's Major Dramatic Question, a variation on "How will this turn out?" is provoked to mind. JAWS: Will the sheriff kill the shark, or the shark the sheriff? LA NOTTE: After Lidia (Jeanne Moreau) tells her husband (Marcello Mastroianni) that he disgusts her and she's leaving, will she go or stay? JALSAGHER (THE MUSIC ROOM): Biswas (Huzur Roy), an aristocrat with a life-consuming love of music, decides to sell his wife's jewels, then his palace to finance his passion for beauty. Will extravagance destroy or redeem this connoisseur?

In Hollywood jargon, the Central Plot's Inciting Incident is the "big hook." It must occur onscreen because this is the event that incites and captures the audience's curiosity. Hunger for the answer to the Major Dramatic Question grips the audience's interest, holding it to the last act's climax.

Second, witnessing the Inciting Incident projects an image of the Obligatory Scene into the audience's imagination. The Obligatory Scene (AKA Crisis) is an event the audience knows it must see before the story can end. This scene will bring the protagonist into a confrontation with the most powerful forces of antagonism in his quest, forces stirred to life by the Inciting Incident that will gather focus and strength through the course of the story. The scene is called "obligatory" because having teased the audience into anticipating this moment, the writer is obligated to keep his promise and show it to them.

JAWS: When the shark attacks a vacationer and the sheriff discovers her remains, an vivid image comes to mind: The shark and the sheriff do battle face-to-face. We don't know how we'll get there, or how it'll turn out. But we do know the film can't be over until the shark has the sheriff virtually in its jaws. Screenwriter Peter Benchley could not have played this critical event from the point of view of townspeople peering out to sea with binoculars, wondering: "Is that the sheriff? Is that the shark?" BOOM! Then have sheriff and marine biologist (Richard Dreyfuss) swim ashore, shouting, "Oh, what a fight. Let us tell you about it." Having projected the image in our mind, Benchley was obligated to put us with the sheriff when it happens.

Unlike action genres that bring the Obligatory Scene immediately and vividly to mind, other more interior genres hint at this scene in the Inciting Incident, then like a photo negative in acid solution, slowly bring it into focus. In TENDER MERCIES Mac Sledge is drowning in booze and an utterly meaningless life. His ascent from rock bottom begins when he meets a lonely woman with a son who needs a father. He's inspired to write some new songs, then accepts baptism and tries to make peace with his estranged daughter. Gradually he pieces together a meaningful life.

The audience, however, senses that because the dragon of meaninglessness drove Sledge to rock bottom, it must once again rear its gruesome head, that the story can't end until he is slapped in the face with the cruel absurdity of life—this time in all its soul-destroying force. The Obligatory Scene comes in the form of a hideous accident that kills his only child. If a drunk needed an excuse to pick up a bottle again, this would do. Indeed, his daughter's death plunges his ex-wife into a drugged stupor, but Sledge finds strength to go on.

The death of Sledge's daughter was "obligatory" in this sense: Suppose Horton Foote had written this scenario: The friendless alcoholic Sledge wakes up one morning with nothing to live for. He meets a woman, falls in love, likes her kid and wants to raise him, finds religion, and writes a new tune. FADE OUT. This isn't story; it's daydream. If the quest for meaning has brought about a profound inner change in Sledge, how is Foote to express this? Not through declarations of a change of heart. Self-explanatory dialogue convinces no one. It must be tested by an ultimate event, by pressure-filled character choice and action—the Obligatory (Crisis) Scene and Climax of the last act.

When I say that the audience "knows" an Obligatory Scene awaits, it doesn't know in an objective, checklist sense. If this event is mishandled, the audience won't exit thinking, "Lousy flick. No Obligatory Scene." Rather, the audience knows intuitively when something is missing. A lifetime of story ritual has taught the audience to anticipate that the forces of antagonism provoked at the Inciting Incident will build to the limit of human experience, and that the telling cannot end until the protagonist is in some sense face to face with these forces at their most powerful. Linking a story's Inciting Incident to its Crisis is an aspect of *Foreshadowing*, the arrangement of early events to prepare for later events. In fact, every choice you make—genre, setting, character, mood—foreshadows. With each line of dialogue or image of action you guide the audience to anticipate certain possibilities, so that when events arrive, they somehow satisfy the expectations you've created. The primary component of foreshadowing, however, is the projection of the Obligatory Scene (Crisis) into the audience's imaginaton by the Inciting Incident.

LOCATING THE INCITING INCIDENT

Where to place the Inciting Incident in the overall story design? As a rule of thumb, the first major event of the Central Plot occurs within the first 25 percent of the telling. This is a useful guide, no matter what the medium. How long would you make a theatre audience sit in the dark before engaging the story in a play? Would you make a reader plow through the first hundred pages of a four-hundred-page novel before finding the Central Plot? How long before irredeemable boredom sets in? The standard for a two-hour feature film is to locate the Central Plot's Inciting Incident somewhere within the first half-hour.

It could be the very first thing that happens. In the first thirty seconds of SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS Sullivan (Joel McCrea), a director of vapid but profitable films, defies studio bosses and sets out to make a film with social significance. Within the first two minutes of ON THE WATERFRONT Terry (Marlon Brando) unwittingly helps gangsters murder a friend.

Or much later. Twenty-seven minutes into TAXI DRIVER a teenage prostitute, Iris (Jodie Foster), jumps into Travis Bickle's (Robert De Niro) taxi. Her abusive pimp, Matthew (Harvey Keitel) yanks her back to the street, igniting Travis's desire to rescue her. A half-hour into ROCKY an obscure club fighter, Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone), agrees to fight Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) for the heavyweight championship of the world. When Sam plays "As Time Goes By" thirty-two minutes into CASABLANCA, Ilsa suddenly reappears in Rick's life, launching one of the screen's great love stories.

Or anywhere in between. However, if the Central Plot's Inciting Incident arrives much later than fifteen minutes into the film, boredom becomes a risk. Therefore, while the audience waits for the main plot, a subplot may be needed to engage their interest.

In TAXI DRIVER, the subplot of Travis's lunatic attempt at political assassination grips us. In ROCKY we're held by the ghetto love story of the painfully shy Adrian (Talia Shire) and the equally troubled Rocky. In CHINATOWN Gittes is duped into investigating Hollis Mulwray for adultery, and this subplot fascinates us as he struggles to untangle himself from the ruse. CASABLANCA's Act One hooks us with the Inciting Incidents of no fewer than five well-paced subplots.

But why make an audience sit through a subplot, waiting half an hour for the main plot to begin? ROCKY, for example, is in the *Sports Genre*. Why not start with two quick scenes: The heavyweight champion gives an obscure club fighter a shot at the title (setup), followed by Rocky choosing to take the fight (payoff). Why not open the film with its Central Plot?

Because if ROCKY's Inciting Incident were the first event we saw, our reaction would have been a shrug and "So what?" Therefore, Stallone uses the first half-hour to delineate Rocky's world and character with craft and economy, so that when Rocky agrees to the fight, the audience's reaction is strong and complete: "Him? That loser?!" They sit in shock, dreading the blood-soaked, bone-crushing defeat that lies ahead.

Bring in the Central Plot's Inciting Incident as soon as possible . . . but not until the moment is ripe.

An Inciting Incident must "hook" the audience, a deep and complete response. Their response must not only be emotional, but rational. This event must not only pull at audience's feelings, but cause them to ask the Major Dramatic Question and imagine the Obligatory Scene. Therefore, the location of the Central Plot's Inciting Incident is found in the answer to this question: How much does the audience need to know about the protagonist and his world to have a full response?

In some stories, nothing. If an Inciting Incident is archetypal in nature, it requires no setup and must occur immediately. The first sentence of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* reads: "One day Gregor Samsa awoke to discover he had been changed into a large cockroach." KRAMER VS. KRAMER: A wife walks out on her husband and leaves her child with him in the film's first two minutes. It needs no preparation, for we immediately understand the terrible impact that would have on anybody's life. JAWS: Shark eats swimmer, sheriff discovers body. These two scenes strike within the first seconds as we instantly grasp the horror.

Suppose Peter Benchley had opened JAWS with scenes of the sheriff quitting his job with the New York City police and moving out to Amity Island, looking forward to a peaceful life as a law officer in this resort town. We meet his family. We meet the town council and mayor. Early summer brings the tourists. Happy times. Then a shark eats somebody. And suppose Spielberg had been foolish enough to shoot all of this exposition, would we have seen it? No. Editor Verna Fields would have dumped it on the cutting room floor, explaining that all the audience needs to know about the sheriff, his family, the mayor, city council, and tourists will be nicely dramatized in the town's *reaction* to the attack . . . but JAWS starts with the shark.

As soon as possible, but not until the moment is ripe . . . Every story world and cast are different, therefore, every Inciting Incident is a different event located at a different point. If it arrives too soon, the audience may be confused. If it arrives too late, the audience may be bored. The instant the audience has a sufficient understanding of character and world to react fully, execute your Inciting Incident. Not a scene earlier, or a scene later. The exact moment is found as much by feeling as by analysis.

If we writers have a common fault in design and placement of the Inciting Incident, it's that we habitually delay the Central Plot while we pack our opening sequences with exposition. We consistently underestimate knowledge and life experience of the audience, laying out our characters and world with tedious details the filmgoer has already filled in with common sense.

Ingmar Bergman is one of the cinema's best directors because he is, in my opinion, the cinema's finest screenwriter. And the one quality that stands above all the others in Bergman's writing is his extreme economy—how little he tells us about anything. In his THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY, for example, all we ever learn about his four characters is that the father is a widowed, best-selling novelist, his son-in-law a doctor, his son a student, and his daughter a schizophrenic, suffering from the same illness that killed her mother. She's been released from a mental hospital to join her family for a few days by the sea, and that act alone upsets the balance of forces in all their lives, propelling a powerful drama from the first moments.

No book-signing scenes to help us understand that the father is a commercial but not critical success. No scenes in an operating room to demonstrate the doctor's profession. No boarding school scenes to explain how much the son needs his father. No electric shock treatment sessions to explain the daughter's anguish. Bergman knows that his urbane audience quickly grasps the implications behind best-seller, doctor, boarding school, and mental hospital . . . and that less is always more.

THE QUALITY OF THE INCITING INCIDENT

A favorite joke among film distributors goes like this: A typical European film opens with golden, sunlit clouds. Cut to even more splendid, bouffant clouds. Cut again to yet more magnificent, rubescent clouds. A Hollywood film opens with golden, billowing clouds. In the second shot a 747 jumbo jet comes out of the clouds. In the third, it explodes.

What quality of event need an Inciting Incident be?

ORDINARY PEOPLE carries a Central Plot and subplot that are often mistaken for each other because of their unconventional design. Conrad (Timothy Hutton) is the protagonist of the film's subplot with an Inciting Incident that takes the life of his older brother during a storm at sea. Conrad survives but is guilt-ridden and suicidal. The brother's death is in the Backstory and is dramatized in flashback at the Crisis/Climax of the subplot when Conrad relives the boating accident and chooses to live.

The Central Plot is driven by Conrad's father, Calvin (Donald Sutherland). Although seemingly passive, he is by definition the protagonist: the empathetic character with the will and capacity to pursue desire to the end of the line. Throughout the film, Calvin is on a quest for the cruel secret that haunts his family and makes reconciliation between his son and wife impossible. After a painful struggle, he finds it: His wife hates Conrad, not since the death of her older son, but since Conrad's birth.

At the Crisis Calvin confronts his wife, Beth (Mary Tyler Moore) with the truth: She's an obsessively orderly woman who wanted only one child. When her second son came along, she resented his craving for love when she could love only her firstborn. She's always hated Conrad, and he's always felt it. This is why he's been suicidal over his brother's death. Calvin then forces the Climax: She must learn to love Conrad or leave. Beth goes to a closet, packs a suitcase, and heads out the door. She cannot face her inability to love her son.

This Climax answers the Major Dramatic Question: Will the family solve its problems within itself or be torn apart? Working backward from it, we seek the Inciting Incident, the event that has upset the balance of Calvin's life and sent him on his quest.

The film opens with Conrad coming home from a psychiatric hospital, presumably cured of his suicidal neurosis. Calvin feels that the family has survived its loss and balance has been restored. The next morning Conrad, in a grim mood, sits opposite his father at the breakfast table. Beth puts a plate of French toast under her son's face. He refuses to eat. She snatches the plate away, marches to the sink, and scrapes his breakfast down a garbage disposal, muttering: "You can't keep French toast."

Director Robert Redford's camera cuts to the father as the man's life crashes. Calvin instantly senses that the hatred is back with a vengeance. Behind it hides something fearful. This chilling event grips the audience with dread as it reacts, thinking: "Look what she did to her child! He's just home from the hospital and she's doing this number on him."

Novelist Judith Guest and screenwriter Alvin Sargent gave Calvin a quiet characterization, a man who won't leap up from the table and try to bully wife and son into reconciliation. His first thought is to give them time and loving encouragements, such as the family photo scene. When he learns of Conrad's troubles at school, he hires a psychiatrist for him. He talks gently with his wife, hoping to understand.

Because Calvin is a hesitant, compassionate man, Sargent had to build the dynamic of the film's progressions around the subplot. Conrad's struggle with suicide is far more active than Calvin's subtle quest. So Sargent foregrounded the boy's subplot, giving it inordinate emphasis and screentime, while carefully increasing the momentum of the Central Plot in the background. By the time the subplot ends in the psychiatrist's office, Calvin is ready to bring the Central Plot to its devastating end. The point, however, is that the Inciting Incident of ORDINARY PEOPLE is triggered by a woman scraping French toast down a garbage disposal.

Henry James wrote brilliantly about story art in the prefaces to his novels, and once asked: "What, after all, is an event?" An event, he said, could be as little as a woman putting her hand on the table and looking at you "that certain way." In the right context, just a gesture and a look could mean, "I'll never see you again," or "I'll love you forever"—a life broken or made.

The quality of the Inciting Incident (for that matter, any event) must be germane to the world, characters, and genre surrounding it. Once it is conceived, the writer must concentrate on its function. Does the Inciting Incident radically upset the balance of forces in the protagonist's life? Does it arouse in the protagonist the desire to restore balance? Does it inspire in him the conscious desire for that object, material or immaterial, he feels would restore the balance? In a complex protagonist, does it also bring to life an unconscious desire that contradicts his conscious need? Does it launch the protagonist on a quest for his desire? Does it raise the Major Dramatic Question in the mind of the audience? Does it project an image of the Obligatory Scene? If it does all this, then it can be as little as a woman putting her hand on the table, looking at you "that certain way."

CREATING THE INCITING INCIDENT

The Climax of the last act is far and away the most difficult scene to create: It's the soul of the telling. If it doesn't work, the story doesn't work. But the second most difficult scene to write is the Central Plot's Inciting Incident. We rewrite this scene more than any other. So here are some questions to ask that should help bring it to mind.

What is the worst possible thing that could happen to my protagonist? How could that turn out to be the best possible thing that could happen to him?

KRAMER VS. KRAMER. The worst: Disaster strikes the workaholic Kramer (Dustin Hoffman) when his wife walks out on him and her child. The best: This turns out to be the shock he needed to fulfill his unconscious desire to be a loving human being.

AN UNMARRIED WOMAN. The worst: When her husband says he's leaving her for another woman, Erica (Jill Clayburgh) retches. The best: His exit turns out to be the freeing experience that allows this male-dependent woman to fulfill her unconscious desire for independence and self-possession.

Or: What's the best possible thing that could happen to my protagonist? How could it become the worst possible thing?

DEATH IN VENICE. Von Aschenbach (Dirk Bogarde) has lost his wife and children to a plague. Since then he's buried himself in his work to the point of physical and mental collapse. His doctor sends him to the Venice spa to recuperate. The best: There he falls madly, helplessly in love . . . but with a boy. His passion for the impossibly beautiful youth, and the impossibility of it, leads to despair. The worst: When a new plague invades Venice and the child's mother hurries her son away, Von Aschenbach lingers to wait for death and escape from his misery.

THE GODFATHER, PART II. The best: After Michael (Al Pacino) is made Don of the Corleone crime family, he decides to take his family into the legitimate world. The worst: His ruthless enforcement of the mafia code of loyalty ends in the assassination of his closest associates, estrangement from his wife and children, and the murder of his brother, leaving him a hollowed-out, desolate man.

A story may turn more than one cycle of this pattern. What is the best? How could that become the worst? How could that reverse yet again into the protagonist's salvation? Or: What is the worst? How could that become the best? How could that lead the protagonist to damnation? We stretch toward the "bests" and "worsts" because story—when it is art—is not about the middle ground of human experience.

The impact of the Inciting Incident creates our opportunity to reach the limits of life. It's a kind of explosion. In *Action* genres it may be in fact an explosion; in other films, as muted as a smile. No matter how subtle or direct, it must upset the status quo of the protagonist and jolt his life from its existing pattern, so that chaos invades the character's universe. Out of this upheaval, you must find, at Climax, a resolution, for better or worse, that rearranges this universe into a new order.