

The Character Driven Plot

Creating the Plot of your story from
your character's point of view

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The Big Question

What does this do for my story?

With everything you learn in this industry, always test it before you change your entire manuscript. Even if something works for another writer, it does not mean it will work for you! Remember, creativity is subjective.

“Be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.”

- William Shakespeare 1564 - 1616

Create a story that resonates with the reader

Joseph Campbell – The Hero with 1000 faces

He found that no matter the time period, there were common threads through every story throughout time that will reach out and grab the imagination of the reader.

That is why Archetypes work so well. They resonate in us, the humans who are reading/watching/listening to the story. Just don't lock yourself into a box.

What Makes a Hero?

Identifiable – They have to be the everyman. This is the guy or girl that your reader is going to become as they read your story.

Luke – moisture farmer

Frodo – living in the Shire, helping his uncle with the day-to-day errands

Something that sets them apart – There has to be something in your hero that is going to be the catalyst for why destiny chooses them.

Luke – has the ability to use the Force and is the son of the bad guy

Frodo – is a giver, not normal for your selfish Hobbits

Not Perfect – They are going to become larger than life. They need something that the reader can say, “Wow, I know how they feel.”

Luke – is a whiny kid who is unsure of himself

Frodo – is always trying to please others, even to his own discomfort

Doers - Accept the Call – When destiny comes knocking, complain about it or not, a hero will accept the call. (Even if they have to be forced into it)

Luke – goes with Obi-Wan

Frodo – takes the ring and leaves the shire

Gandalf – at the start, he runs off and does a bunch of research. Still, this is action, as it leads him to confirm that it really is the one true ring.

Razors Edge – a hero is willing to take chances to complete the quest.

Luke – willing to dress up as a storm trooper to rescue the princess from a maximum-security prison on a Deathstar they are trying to escape from themselves.

Frodo – willing to be the ring bearer even though there are others who want it

Risk Lives – willing to put it all on the line

Sacrifice – A hero will always have to give something up to achieve their goal. Otherwise, they did not earn it and your readers will lose faith in them.

Luke – loses his family, Obi-Wan, and before it's all over, his father

Frodo – loses Gandalf, Bilbo, friends

Grow and Change – A hero should be in a constant state of growth.

Luke – goes from a kid to a serious Jedi

Frodo – becomes a leader to his people

What Makes a Villain?

Established – They already have a foothold in life. They are usually the catalyst to the plot.

Identifiable – They have to be the everyman. This is the guy or girl that your reader is going to become as they read your story.

Darth Vader – big, black suit, and scary. But, you feel for him by the end.

Sauron – a big friggin eye. Scary, yes. But who cares. (Biggest letdown)

Something that sets them apart – There has to be something in your Villain that is the catalyst for why destiny chose them.

Not Perfect – They are going to become larger than life. They need something that the reader can say, “Wow, if I was in that situation, I might make those same mistakes/choices.”

Darth Vader – tragedy we can all relate to. His big motivation to go to the dark side was so he could get married and have kids.

Sauron – not relatable at all, and is not a good villain.

Doers – Destiny came knocking... they answered.

Darth Vader – shifted to the dark side to marry, then became trapped in the downward spiral of evil.

Razors Edge – A Villain is willing to take those chances to get what he wants.

Darth Vader – goes out in a fighter and mixes it up with the attacking rebels to try and save the Deathstar.

Takes Lives – This is the biggest difference between a hero and a villain.

Sacrifice – A villain will always be willing to give something up to achieve their goal.

Darth Vader – in the beginning, willing to lie to get what he wanted. By the end, he was killing friends and children, sacrificing his soul

Grow and Change – Like a Hero, a villain should be in a constant state of growth.

Darth Vader – Angry kid; to a bloodthirsty killer; to a savior of the universe.

There is no such thing as a Villain

There really is only one difference between a Hero and a Villain. You, the storyteller. The mistake most writers make with Villains... they treat them as a Villain.

A writer will spend all sorts of time fleshing out their heroes, creating their back-story, the reasons why they do the things they do, what motivates them, etc. But, with the bad guy, they don't. They just say, “He's the bad guy... because he is bad.”

This is a HUGE mistake.

Again – Think about Sauron...

How to accomplish this?

The Hero's Journey... Drake's 12-step guide to the life and times of your Hero. Keep in mind, a list is a good place to start. None of this has to be in the order presented. None of it is the “be all, end all” of storytelling. This is a skeleton you can hang your story on. Nothing more.

Let us set the basics

Most stories are written in a three act way.

Act 1 – This is the origin section of your story. The setup.

Act 2 – This is the questing section of your story. The special world.

Act 3 – This is the resolution section of your story. The climax.

Act One

Step One – Creating the Everyman

The reader needs to see the hero at his roots. This is why almost every story starts with the hero as a nobody. My genre, fantasy, is riddled with tales that start with the 16-year-old farm boy. But, what is the world like? What is your hero's home life like? What is his job? What can you, the writer, do to let the reader feel connected to this hero?

Luke – moisture farmer

Frodo – living in the shire, helping his uncle with the day-to-day errands

Step Two – The Call to Adventure

Something comes along and pulls the character out of his mundane world and sends him into a new, “special” world.

Luke – buys a droid, finds a message, “Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi, you're our only hope”

Frodo – given a magical ring and is then told he is being hunted and must run for his life

Step Three – Refusal of the Call

For this to be an epic story, the hero has to be called to do something that is beyond them. Something he does not currently have the ability to do. Something bigger than life, larger than anything they could possibly handle.

Luke – Obi-Wan says, let's go deliver this message. Luke says no. When his family is killed, he is forced to go. (Notice this is just a baby step to the actual call to action, which is that Luke is going to destroy the Deathstar.)

Does not have to be a refusal, could just be a momentary pause of, “Oh crap, this is big” to let the reader *feel* the enormity of the situation.

Frodo – after Gandalf gets him ready, he stops and looks around his house

It's just that time to let your readers know that what is about to happen is really big, really dangerous, and really about to happen.

Step Four – The Outside Aid

We have already established that our hero can't overcome what has just intruded on his life. So now what?

Luke – has Obi-Wan and gains Han. Obi-Wan is like, here is your father's light saber, here is how to use the force.

Frodo – Gandalf starts him on his way, oh, and here is Samwise whom you will need, oh and find Strider, oh and go with him to Rivendale and the Elves.

So, up to now, these are really just plot elements that set up the story. For the most part, the above is happening in the “normal world” where we found our hero at the start of the story.

It is now time to let the reader know they need to buckle up, because Kansas is going bye-bye.

Step Five – The Belly of the Whale

Now our hero has everything they need to cross that threshold from his normal, mundane world to that “special” world that will be the playground for the remainder of our story.

Like Jonah, our hero has been swallowed by destiny and is now being spit into a new world.

He does not have what he needs to win the final battle.

He is already different from the person we met at the start of the story.

Luke – Luke, Han, and the gang are all in the M.F. laughing it up. Han is waxing all philosophical about his jaded views of the universe and Obi-Wan is all like, use the force, Luke. Then they drop out of hyperspace and BAM! Rocks, asteroids, tie-fighters, Deathstar. (Welcome to act 2)

Frodo – He is healed and united with his friends in Rivendale. They have completed their mission and are going home. Then, BAM! Everyone is arguing and fighting, and Frodo knows they will use the ring instead of destroying it, and it will eventually fall into Sauron's hands. (Welcome to act 2)

Things go downhill really fast.

This is normally the point where act one ends and act two begins. The calm before the storm, as it were. During the first five steps, you are introducing your other characters, pointing to your subplots, and hinting at the big nasty antagonist behind all the bad stuff that has been rolling our hero's way.

Act Two

Step Six – The Gauntlet or The Road of Trials

This is not really a step. Or, it is, just broken down into many mini-steps that will follow. But, basically, your hero has the fundamentals of what they need to start their quest. They have left their comfort zone and are starting to dive into the meat of your story. But, they don't have everything they need to win. Stage six (and act two in general) is where your hero goes on their "mini-quests" and gains the rest of what is needed to get the final job done.

Luke – has to escape the Deathstar, rescue the princess, join up with the rebels, learn to fly a fighter, grow, gain a reason to hate the empire, gain some friends, learn more about the force and destroy the Deathstar.

Frodo – cross the world, avoid basically everything, and drop the ring into the volcano

Act 2 is all about doing things. Remember, this is Drama! Just as you must show your plot progression, you must show your hero's growth progression.

In your plot, you are doing things, like physically moving your characters to where they need to be, and you also need to be doing the same thing with their inner growth.

This is where you will have the majority of your "internal arc" plots taking place. Or your smaller, more personal stories. Your budding romances, your friendships, your heroes gaining the small things they need, etc.

SW – Luke and Obi-Wan develop their father/son relationship. The Luke, Han, Lea love triangle develops. We learn that Wookies are poor losers.

LOTR – we gain some weapons, Gimly finds out what happened to his uncle in Moria, Gandalf finds out Saromon is bad.

If you let your hero skate along—a hero needs to make sacrifices—your readers will quickly lose interest in them and see them as a spoiled brat who gets anything they want.

Conflict is the name of this game.

George Polti wrote "the 36 dramatic situations." I recommend it.

Step Six.One – The Mother as Goddess

The hero, to become complete and overcome the ultimate challenge of the plot, needs to mature, or to unite their masculine and feminine sides. Become whole and comfortable with who they are.

Our Masculine side contains the aggressive, focused, conquering traits

Our Feminine side contains our soft, nurturing, contemplative traits

For a hero to beat the bad guy, they need both to become whole.

This could come from a crush with the opposite sex, a mother figure (father for female), or anything that can open our heroes eyes to whatever trait they have not been using thus far.

Luke – Luke has a crush on Leia from her message. When he finds out she is on the Deathstar, and going to be killed, this attraction helps him to man up and go rescue her.

Frodo – Finds a love for his friends that spills over into a desire to save them from this horrible evil, making him take up the responsibility to take the ring the rest of the way.

Step Six.Two – Atonement of the Father

The hero finally comes face to face with his antagonist. This is a big growth point for our hero as he is forced to face his future, and it is not all that bright.

Luke – Luke is taken in by the empire and realizes how big the threat really is. They destroyed an entire planet!

Obi-Wan – confronts Darth Vader

Frodo – puts on the ring and looks directly into the eye of Sauron. On

Weathertop, he is attacked and stabbed by the Ring Wraiths

Step Six.Three – Temptation

Something comes along to try and lure our hero off his path, or into destruction, or at the least, pull him away from his goal.

Readers want us to test our hero. Show them, hey, he's gotten all these mondo cool powers, weapons, etc. What would happen if he wasn't the good boy we thought he was? How easy would it be for him to abuse what he is gaining?

Luke – faces the dark side

Frodo – slips into being more and more like Golem

Step Six.Four – The whiff of Death

There comes a point where you have to take things to the ultimate level. Things must become deadly for your hero.

This can be a near death experience for the hero, the hero making a choice that causes the death of another, the hero watching another's death, the death of a piece of the hero's personality, the loss of something irreplaceable.

Luke – Obi-Wan is killed by Darth Vader

Frodo – Ring Wraiths almost killed him

This is mostly all going on during Act 2. But, the hero is still not ready. They still do not have what they need to beat that bad guy. So, at some point in your story, you should be getting to the middle of Act 2.

Step Seven – The Ultimate Boon

The ultimate boon is that turning point in the hero's quest where he finds the one thing every hero needs – the ability to believe in himself.

Usually happening during the middle/last half of Act 2.

It is the fundamental mental turning point for our hero. The point where he says to himself, "I can do this."

SW – Luke has gotten the Light Saber, R2D2, Deathstar plans, a rebel army at his back... but it is not until he lets go of his disbelief of the force, and truly comes to terms with the fact that he can use it, that he has any chance of blowing up the Deathstar.

LOTR – Frodo gets the sword, the magic ring, the elven food, the elven rope, aid to the foot of Mordor... but until he comes to terms with the fact that he is the ONLY one who can take this ring, and that all the others will eventually try and stop him, is he able to head into Mordor.

Act 2 is done. The hero is now standing on the threshold of taking on the plot head-on. He has the tools he needs (and he earned them, so the readers are proud of him). He has grown and matured to the point he needs to be (and the readers have joined him in that growth). He is ready. And he knows it. Act 3 is all about "doing it."

Act Three

Step Eight – The Refusal of the Return

Your hero is larger than life. This is great, because you want a powerful hero. But, have you made them un-identifiable to your readers.

Your hero needs a moment of pause. Either to have some self-doubt, to wonder if all the world is ready (or does it deserve) this new power (or weapon or item) he has found, even just an, "Oh, crap. After I do this, I've got to go back to farming? How can I do that?"

Luke – this is when he comes into the Rebel alliance, a Jedi in training, stealer of the Deathstar plans, rescuer of the Princess... and they say, thanks, now go fly that fighter under someone else's command.

Frodo – this is when he gives up in Mordor and Samwise saves the day.

Step Nine – The Magic Flight

The hero has stirred up a hornets nest getting the tools he needs. Now the repercussions of these actions are going to come around and bite him in the butt.

Your hero has to get to the bad guy/threat. Usually, this is a chase scene. Be it from Dragons, hoards of enemy soldiers, what have you. Often this is used to physically move the hero to a location which will set him up for the crescendo.

Luke – get plans and princess. The Empire doesn't say, "they got away, crap."
The Empire throws everything they have at the rebel alliance and Luke has to fight through them to get to the Deathstar.
Frodo – the entire Orcan army is thrown at him.

Again, this is not a list to use in order, or in total, or only once.

Step Ten – Rescue from Without

To start them off, the hero needed a mentor. Now, they have gotten their boons, stirred up the hornets nest... They might need a little help.

Luke – the only reason he escapes the Deathstar is because Darth Vader let him. We find out it was a ruse, since Darth Vader put a tracking device on the M.F. The rebel fleet is going to die, Luke along with them. Yet, here comes Han to save the day.
Frodo – he never stops getting help from without. And it's this vulnerability that makes everyone so attracted to him as the hero. It also is the point where people like Samwise Gamgee steps up and cares for Frodo after the spider bite.

Step Eleven – Master of Two Worlds

The hero has reached a point where they can defeat the evil and overcome the plot because they have learned to master both the world around them, and what is inside of them.

They have combined the lessons from the "normal" world they came from with the lessons from the "special" world of the story.

The hero has reached a new understanding of himself, the world around him, and how he fits into it. They can take all the boons and experience from the story, and become the man/woman that the reader has been hoping they would become.

Luke – he trusts the force, turns off the computer, and blows up the Deathstar
Frodo – (Samwise cannot destroy the ring – he is not the hero) He overcomes the ring's influence, runs into the volcano, fights off Golem, and casts the ring into the fire.

This is the turning point where the hero is truly free. Free to live without fear of failure, even death. The unbelievably huge task from the beginning of the story - the thing the hero knew he could not overcome - this is when it becomes achievable.

Do not give this to your hero until the very bitter end. If you give this to your hero too soon, then again, he does not earn the victory.

Step Twelve – The New Hero

Your hero now has to find his place in this new “special” world.

This is the tie up section. It is not really about the hero so much as the reader.

For me, there is nothing worse than a story ending after the crescendo. It is a let down. I feel cheated. Your readers have invested a considerable amount of time in your story. I feel you owe them the part about what happens next. How does the Hero return home? How do his friends and family react to them? How does he react to his friends and family?

End

Thank you for your time and attention. I hope you found it informative. Find out more about me at my official website, www.maxwellalexanderdake.com.

I would really love your feedback. Please give me a review of this class at <http://www.meetup.com/Las-Vegas-Creative-Writing-Class/>

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