Lesson 16 – Act One: Liftoff

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Good morning everyone, this is Trevor Van Winkle and you're listening to – Homestead on the Corner.

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"It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door. You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to."

These were the words of Bilbo Baggins to his nephew Frodo in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first novel of JRR Tolkien's opus, *The Lord of the Rings*. They come almost immediately after Frodo and Sam leave the Shire, crossing the boundary between the familiar and unknown for the first time in their lives. They're on the first step of a long and treacherous journey to save the world, and indeed, they have no idea where their feet will carry them. At this point in the plot, they just expect to just get the ring to the elves and then go home. But even so, they have crossed a threshold: stepped out the door and set off with a plan and a desire to fulfill. Their ordinary world has been disrupted, and things can't return to normal until they complete their mission – or so they believe. In reality, the world they've always known will be forever changed by the new perspective and wounds they will carry with them afterwards. Indeed, "there is no knowing where you might be swept off to" once you cross over to the other side.

Whenever you leave the well-worn roads of the everyday, there is always a danger present. In medieval Europe, leaving the village and going into the woods was a dangerous proposition, and fairy tales were told and retold to warn of the dangers of the forest – along with what might be gained if the brave and wise could overcome the wolves, witches, and faeries who dwelt beneath the trees. The seas were once treacherous and deadly, and even now they hold mysteries we have only just begun to comprehend. Yet beyond them were new lands to explore, new frontiers to find, and new discoveries to be made that would change the world forever. And now, the airless void between the worlds represents the last and greatest threshold for humankind to cross – a place so dangerous and alien that a few minutes in its grasp will freeze, boil, and suffocate your frail earthling body alone in the deep dark vacuum of infinity. Yet we keep going out there because… well, just look at it! It's the universe! Unbounded in every direction, full of unknown possibilities and alien worlds just as real and complex as our little blue marble of an Earth. Who knows what will happen out there? Who knows where we'll be swept off to?

Within our lives, we cross many thresholds. We leave home for the first time, move to a new city, go to college, start a new job, make new friends, and form new relationships. *Change* – the lifeblood of both stories and our own lives – requires a move away from the familiar into something new and unfamiliar by its very definition. Whether by choice or by circumstances beyond our control, we are pushed out into the woods, past the shore, and through the atmosphere into a strange and alien set of circumstances. Whether we know what to expect or not, we are almost never practically prepared for the reality of living in them.

As we pass out of the ordinary world of the protagonist and into the extraordinary realm where story really occurs, we'll examine ways to make that transition clear, compelling, and exciting to the reader by demonstrating the challenge facing our hero and how they will learn to adapt and overcome through the course of the narrative.

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At every point in writing, it's important to know where you are and where you're going, but especially in your first act. So let's recap where we are: the hook has introduced your protagonist's ordinary world and personal thesis – their flawed and incomplete way of looking at life – in a way that creates a compelling context for the reader. An inciting incident occurs that fundamentally disrupts the basis for that thesis, making it untenable or unsustainable. This is because the protagonist has just lost something, either physical or psychological, that they've used to define their sense of self. This could be as extreme as a loved one dying or as simple as losing their sense of safety. Because of this, their internal continuity and narrative are disrupted, and they become resistant to change. Yet they have to change. Either because of their own actions or the influence of an external force, their situation has changed, and they have to adapt in order to survive. Refusal to do so would lead to character death: either a literal, physical death or a metaphorical one caused by a refusal to move and grow.

It's at this crossroads that we now find ourselves. The character has an internal need that should have been clearly demonstrated by now: a belief or pattern of behavior that either hurts themselves (a psychological need) and/or others (a moral need). Their equilibrium and balance in life has been irreversibly disrupted. Much as they might like to go back to the way things were, the inciting incident makes that impossible. But they still don't have to progress any further. We know that people can stay where they are and adapt to pretty much anything. Luke Skywalker could stay on Tatooine and take over his aunt and uncle's farm, or get a job as a bush pilot. Frodo could bury the one ring in his backyard and just hope nobody finds it. Jean Valjean could take Bishop Muriel's silver and hide away, continuing to live his life as a criminal and fugitive. But I think you can see the problem: if they refuse to change, they will be destroyed. Valjean will eventually be caught by the police or killed by another thief, the Ringwraiths will find Bag End, kill Frodo, and take the ring, and we all sense that if Luke doesn't join

the rebellion, it would only be a matter of time before the death star appeared in the skies of Tatooine.

The forces of antagonism are active in your story world before the narrative begins, first appearing in the hook or at the inciting incident of your narrative. They are already moving towards their goal while the protagonist hesitates over whether or not to leave their comfortable little bubble. And whether or not they realize it, something about their circumstances or personality puts them on a direct collision-course with those forces. If they don't start moving and preparing for that confrontation as well, they will be caught with their guard down and no way of defending themselves. This is why a refusal to change and adapt leads to character death. In a compelling story, the world cannot just be sitting by and letting the protagonist get along with their life in peace.

Nor can it allow them to just retreat forever. The design of an antagonist or force of antagonism has to be such that they or it will pursue the protagonist to the ends of the earth if they try to escape. The biblical story of Jonah is perhaps the best example of this. Not wanting to obey God and preach to the foreigners of Ninevah, Jonah gets on a boat and sails in the opposite direction. He flees deeper into his safe, ordinary world, in other words – or at least, he tries to. But the extraordinary catches up with him en route in the form of a massive storm and a whale that swallows him whole. It's only in the belly of the beast the Jonah repents and finally gets with the program – he has to obey the call. He can't escape the extraordinary world, and trying only leads further into it with less time to prepare. He has to turn and face his problems head on if he's going to survive them.

The inciting incident is a major disruption, but it's not a point of no return – it's a change in circumstances, not a decision. In John Yorke's *Into the Woods: A Five-Act Journey into Structure*, he says, quote: "Every act has two turning points within it, the latter of which acts as an explosion that invites the protagonist into an alien world." End quote. That "explosion," Yorke goes on to say, is a crisis point. Dictionary.com defines "Crisis" as, quote, "a condition of instability or danger, leading to a decisive change." End quote. It is a moment of decision, choice, and change in response to chaos. **The protagonist must make a choice – an active choice of their own free will, reluctant or not, that will fundamentally change their approach to this problem.** Your protagonist cannot simply stumble over the first threshold. They may stumble into the circumstances of the inciting incident, but as stated above, they still have a chance to turn back, illusory though it might be. However, the story can't really begin until the reader sees them make a choice to resolve that crisis.

Once that choice is made, there's no turning back. The protagonist may make a different choice later in the story, and will often choose to adopt a different tactic several times throughout the narrative. But they won't be able to go back to the way things were, nor will they be able to de-escalate to lesser, simpler actions. Rather, they are now on a path of

progressively escalating plans, failures, and risks on the way to the climax and final crisis moment of your narrative. Once they've passed the first threshold, the door to the ordinary world locks behind them until they can defeat their antagonist and return with the knowledge or insight that will fix their internal need. In the words of Anna Sheridan: "The only way out is through."

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How do you make it clear that the threshold between the ordinary world and the extraordinary one has been crossed, though? In some stories, it's obvious: the protagonist makes a literal transition into a different world, physically separated from our own. This is most often in science-fiction and fantasy. The Pevensies enter Narnia, Luke Skywalker leaves the planet, and the Doctor's companions leave their home in the time machine known as the TARDIS for the first time. Rowan returns to the Echowood, Captain Aster leaves Homeworld aboard the Elementis, and Eli Barrett washes up on a deserted island with Anne Bonny. A physical departure from the familiar, known world is the clearest way to demonstrate the end of act 1, and where the logic of your story allows it, you should take advantage of this technique.

However, this is far from the only way to demonstrate that a threshold has been crossed. The first variation on this technique is to have your protagonist enter a different space within the same physical world. A hero who is used to being on top of the socioeconomic food chain ends up penniless and depressed on the streets, as in the first threshold of the film *The Fisher King*. Or it could happen in the other direction, such as in *The Prince and the Pauper* and the slew of homages and pastiches surrounding it. A sudden shift in status or power is just as extreme a change as moving to a new location: there are new rules to learn, new dangers and risks to face, and new characters to meet. This change places the protagonist in a different world just as surely as stepping through a magic wardrobe does.

Another technique is to have the ordinary world be transformed by the arrival of the antagonistic force. In the case of a natural disaster or a strong personal antagonist, their presence can alter the very landscape and rules of the world. One strong example is the rise of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*, as he transforms Gotham into a nightmarish version of itself: one where no one is safe, the old rulers are no longer in control, and firetrucks burn in the street. This reflects "the battle for Gotham's soul" throughout the film. There are two versions of the city: Gotham as Batman sees it, and Gotham as the Joker sees it. One represents the thesis, the ordinary world, and the other the antithesis. Batman crosses that threshold when he is forced to play by the Joker's rules and fight him in his penthouse in front of a crowd of socialites, rather than from the shadows.

This same effect can be achieved in less grandiose, genre-focused stories. When someone close to us disappears, it fundamentally

changes the emotional tone and social rules of the world we operate in. Until a new equilibrium is found, the home that normally represented our ordinary world is transformed into an ever-shifting shadow of its former self: an ordinary world that has been made unfamiliar by changes within it. This is often the case in domestic and family dramas that are set in a single location, where the crossing of the threshold cannot be signified by a change in location or status.

Occasionally, these techniques are mixed and recombined in a variety of interesting ways. For instance, in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the structure of the show and the budget constraints that defined it meant that many episodes took place entirely on the USS Enterprise: a standing set that could be used and re-used *ad infinitum*. In the pilot episode *Encounter at Farpoint*, the first appearance of the Q entity – the antagonist of the episode and, to some extent, the series – signals the inciting incident. However, Picard's choice in response to this is to flee, at which point Q teleports the crew into an illusory courtroom to stand trial for humanity's actions. In this series of events, we have crisis decision, an attempt to flee the call to adventure, and a crossing of a threshold – in this case, physically. But when the crew are returned to the Enterprise, they don't truly leave the extraordinary world: they know they are being tested by the Q, and they can't escape his influence by running away.

In the Doctor Who episode *Heaven Sent*, the twelfth doctor faces off against a monster made of nightmares in a shifting, maze-like castle he cannot escape. The first act sees the Doctor arriving in this mysterious place, briefly examining his surroundings, and then facing the Veil: a terrifying projection of his own fears, created to scare him to death. Backed into a corner with no means of escape, he decides to jump out of a window, narrowly avoiding death by carefully calculating a way to survive his fall... while he's falling. We follow the Doctor into his own head, where he visualizes himself in the TARDIS explaining the solution to his dead companion, Clara. *Heaven Sent* really is a remarkable piece of science fiction because it dramatizes grief within the plot, using the Doctor's memory of Clara to push him towards change and growth in the wake of her death. In many ways, this memory of Clara *is* the antagonist, and when she first appears onscreen, she provides the break into act two for a complex story that, by the end of it, spans billions of years.

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Why is this transition to a new world so important to story structure, though? Why can't the protagonist change in a consistent, singular world? Don't people change within their normal worlds all the time?

It may be a debate for psychologists and philosophers whether people really change in that way – but in stories, it just doesn't happen that way. Characters don't change because they want to, or because they decide to without reason. They decide to cross the threshold, to face

their demons, to protect what they love… but they don't choose to change on their own. And the simplest reason for this fact? The first and most fundamental law of good storytelling: show, don't tell.

I think we all roll our eyes a little bit when someone tells us that a seemingly inane experience resulted in their life being changed forever. Whether it's a vacation or some kind of spiritual retreat, we don't entirely believe people when they tell us they're a changed person because of it. Perhaps the experience really was life changing, but we didn't see it that way. In our lives, change occurs slowly and subtly, and only happens suddenly in response to crisis and trauma. Saying that a pleasant or everyday occurrence changed them on a fundamental level seems like a laughable statement.

Again, storytelling is life, amplified. **What is hidden, subconscious, and internal must be made external – shown, rather than told.** This, of course, means different things in different mediums. In novels and other works of narrative fiction that allow the reader to get inside the character's head, it means creating a believable and consistent internal monologue – one that will convincingly *show* their transformation. In those cases, the threshold to be crossed is a mental one – a shifting of attitudes or change in thought patterns that indicates the stakes of the external world have increased, whether or not anything has physically changed. In theatre and other performance-based media, conflict is shown through dialogue and relationships between characters. The shift in the characters' world has to be demonstrated and explored using those tools, and the beginning of a major interpersonal problem is usually the indicator that the first threshold has been crossed. And in visual mediums like film and television, the conflicts are most often external or social. Because of this, the break into act two most commonly features a change in physical location.

By focusing on the strengths and unique tools of your writing medium, you can find ways to make the transition to the extraordinary world effective within the story and show an increase in stakes. This is the second reason that the protagonist needs to leave what they're used at the end of the first act: the stakes need to escalate once the hero sets out. If they don't, the reader won't really believe the protagonist can change as a result of this journey. It may be a cliché, but **nothing ventured, nothing gained is truer in storytelling than it is in life.**

If the protagonist doesn't take a genuine risk crossing the threshold and beginning their journey – or if the reader or audience doesn't fell like they're taking a risk – then whatever the protagonist gains, physically or emotionally, will feel unearned, forced, or contrived. Take this example "story:" "Bill went into his garage one morning, found a hundred-dollar bill on the floor, and decided to invest it. Within three years, he was a millionaire.**"** Maybe it's possible that it happened as simply as that – but it's not likely, and more than that, it feels false. Intuitively, we try to fill in the gaps. We know there has to be more to the story for it to be… well, a story. We know that no character gets that rich that quickly

easily or ethically. The story would either be about how Bill beat impossible odds and took incredible risks, or how he sacrificed his morality and soul to gain material wealth at the expense of others. *The Pursuit of Happyness* or *Breaking Bad*, in other words.

Without risks – without stakes – there is no story. And we rarely feel there's anything at stake when we're within our own sphere of influence. Generally, even when our lives are miserable or out of our control, we believe we can manage things better this way than if we stepped out of line and tried something different. Our boss might be annoying and controlling, but at least they're a known quantity in our lives. Leaving our job to seek greener pastures always carries the risk that our new situation will be worse than the old. The same with any relationship, personal or professional – even our relationship with ourselves. We may not necessarily like who we are as people, but at least we have a vague idea of who that person is. Choosing to take a step towards change – be it going to therapy, seeking help with an addiction, or going on a journey of self-discovery – harbors the same risk as any other awkward, unknown change. We don't know who we'll become at the end of this. There's always a chance that we'll end up worse off, push away the people we love, or lose our sense of self in the process. Our brain runs the calculation: nothing ventured, nothing gained – nothing lost.

Except, as we talked about last time, our sense of self isn't static. It doesn't remain the same if we leave it alone: it corrodes, festers, and dies if left to its own devices. *If nothing changes, everything ends*. **A refusal of the call to adventure is not an escape from risk, but a surrender to the inevitability of time and mortality before death.** It is a rejection of the possibility of personal growth and change at the point when it is most likely to occur. It's choosing to listen to fear rather than one's own soul, and for a character who does this, it's the choice that leads them to become a tragic example.

They must step into a realm of uncertainty, ambiguity, and dynamic change, despite every impulse telling them to remain where they are. Story represents an ever-escalating set of stakes for the protagonist that will demonstrate how and why they adapt and grow to the reader or audience. The inciting incident shows what they have to lose: the stakes of the story. Whether that's their life, their marriage, their job, or their universe, the protagonist clearly has skin in the game. But until they choose to sit down at the table and start placing bets, the game can't really begin… The story can't get going.

In flight, there are four fundamental forces that need to be correctly balanced in order to achieve liftoff: lift, weight, thrust, and drag. In a normal airplane, lift is achieved by having air move over the wing in a way that pushes the entire plane up against the pull of gravity. Since we can't move the air (at least not without a wind tunnel or a major storm), the plane has to move forward itself. It need thrust: a force pushing hundreds of tons of steel and fuel down the runway and up into the air.

In other words, if the plane isn't moving, it doesn't takeoff – and it certainly can't get anywhere interesting. But every time a plane takes off, it's a risk: marginal, with modern aviation technology, but infinitely greater than it was on the ground. The higher the plane flies, the harder it will hit the ground if something goes wrong. In physics, this chance of falling is called "potential energy:" a source of energy just waiting to be realized. As in life, so in story. Climbing higher means you have further to fall, trying harder means you have room to fail. That risk – the chance that everything might go horribly wrong – is what powers your story as you head into act two. **From now until you reach the end of your story, the stakes will only get higher and higher, and the actions of your protagonist more and more extreme to face them.** But it all starts with that first threshold crossed, that first risk taken. Let your reader see it clearly, and your story will resonate with them far more deeply.

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Thank you for listening to this episode of Homestead on the Corner! Today's first step forward was written and produced by Trevor Van Winkle, and featured music from Lauren Baker and Jesse Haugen.

Speaking of new ventures, our brand new fiction podcast "The Sheridan Tapes" just launched last Friday! To find out where to listen to it, head over to thesheridantapes.com for show links and more info. In the meantime, follow us on Instagram and Twitter @trevor_VW for updates on both of our shows, and check out Patreon.com/homesteadcorner if you want to support our little production team.

Next episode, we step fully into the world of adventure as our hero faces their first challenges and tentative victories. New episodes of this podcast release every Wednesday at 2pm Pacific Standard Time, so be sure to subscribe so you don't miss it.

Well, that's about all for now. From the Homestead on the Corner, have a great day, and keep writing.