Lesson 24 – Act Two: Climax

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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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What happens when everything runs out? When the excuses and the half measures and the compromises stop working, and all your problems hit you smack in the face? What happens when everything you've tried fails, and the whole house of cards comes tumbling down? What happens when a crisis knocks you down, and you realize there's no way to go back to the way things were?

Well, the way I see it, you have two real options when this happens. Once denying the reality of the situation is no longer possible, you either have to turn and face your problems head on, or crack under the pressure and give in to an overwhelming reality. Running away might delay the inevitable, but that's all it would be – putting it off for another day. When you can no longer run, the truth destroys you.

In every story, this moment comes for the protagonists sooner or later. Through a long string of challenges and failed attempts to fulfill their want and need, they find themselves facing down the source of their problems: the person or thing that disrupted their ordinary world at the inciting incident. It's just good storytelling**: to introduce a disruptive force into the narrative is to set up a confrontation with it in the reader's expectations**. You can subvert that expectation if you have a good thematic or story-based reason, sure – but in 90% of stories, the last, greatest moment of conflict in the story is when the protagonist confronts the primary source of antagonism. Whether that's a quiet but emotional conversation in the corner booth of a café or a knock-down drag-out brawl in the mud or a battlefield clash between the armies of the hero and villain, the primary representatives of the thesis and antithesis of your story finally collide fully, and in the process create the synthesis that will define the final act. The dialectical approach to storytelling is one of its most enduring and pervasive forms, and nowhere is it clearer than here, at the final moment of conflict – the decisive argument in word and action that we call **The Climax**.

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I think we all know what a story climax is intuitively. It's typically the most tense, edge of your seat moments in the story, when the stakes are the highest they'll ever be and all the big questions of plot, character, and theme are thrown up in the air just before they're answered. The protagonist has just made the critical story decision at the crisis moment, and the rest of the story unfolds from that choice. Everything they've learned and done so far is put to the test at this point. No matter how spectacular or bombastic the climax is, this is what it's really doing (or should be doing): **pitting the changed protagonist against their antagonist or antagonists to see which of them is right**. It's premise in action: the thesis has been proven insufficient by the strength of the antithesis, and now the protagonist must synthesize the two into a third perspective that is stronger than either one alone. Whether the values being argued in the story are personal, spiritual, political, or other, the climax is where the author makes their statement on which is the correct way of living and thinking. In the upside-down world of the second act, the protagonist is tested by and learns from new characters and situations that challenge their preconceived notions and reveal their lack, or psychological need. Only by finally integrating those ideas and wider perspectives into their own can they finally achieve character growth and overcome the obstacles that would have destroyed them before.

This is why the inciting incident and climax are often seen as two halves of the same whole. The climax is often referred to as **the obligatory scene because it's the moment that the reader knows must happen at the moment the inciting incident arrives.** Frodo learns that Bilbo's old ring is *the* one ring, and we as the audience immediately begin to anticipate the moment when the ring is destroyed. Jean Valjean skips parole to live life as a free man, and the reader starts to expect a final confrontation with the law that will decide whether he can remain free or not. Doctor Hilbert tries to murder the crew of the USS Hephaestus on orders from command, and the stage is set for the scrappy, underdog crew to face down all the might of Goddard Futuristics at the climax of *Wolf 359.*

There's another structural reason why these two storytelling beats are so closely connected, and it has to do with two of the most fundamental tenants of good storytelling: **show don't tell** and **characters must change**. At the bare minimum, the protagonist of the story should undergo some major growth or evolution through the course of the story, either overcoming their need or becoming more enslaved to it and falling into ruin. In the best stories, all characters have an arc of change from beginning to end. In *Save the Cat*, Blake Snyder says, quote: "This story, this experience, is so important, so life-changing for all involved – even you, the audience – it affects every single person that is in its orbit." End quote. And in the most memorable and meaningful of stories, even the antagonist changes and grows.

It's often easier and simpler to write the villain as an imposing, inhuman monolith incapable of learning any lessons or making any meaningful

changes, but that means that the only way to end your story is to either kill them off or take away their ability to affect the narrative so completely that they may as well be dead. With a humanized villain, however, you have another option: what John Truby calls a "double reversal" in *The Anatomy of Story*. Quote: "During or just after the battle, give the opponent as well as the hero a self-revelation… Connect the two self-revelations. The hero should learn something from the opponent, and the opponent should learn something from the hero." End quote. This technique helped elevate the *Star Wars* saga from an action adventure to a 6-film arc of tragedy and redemption for Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader. With *Black Panther*, it helped create one of Marvel Studios' most humanized and empathetic villains, Killmonger. And at the conclusion of *Doctor Who* series 10, Missy, the latest incarnation of the show's long-running antagonist The Master, struggles to overcome her villainous past and redeem herself throughout the series. At the crisis, she encounters a literal ghost from her past – her psychopathic former incarnation – and struggles between who she was and who she wants to be, represented respectively by the old Master and the Doctor. At the climax, Missy turns on her old self and decides to fight alongside the Doctor, but the Master, refusing to accept that his future self has changed, murders her to prevent it. As the Master remarks, this is the perfect ending for the two versions of this one complex and complicated character: one growing and changing to the point where they can join the Doctor in a selfless suicide mission, while the other is so unable to change that the two of them end up, in his own words, "stabbing ourselves in the back." It's a heart wrenching scene, and one that adds further levels of complexity and truth to one of *Doctor Who's* most enduring and fascinating villains.

In all of these examples, the technique of double reversal further demonstrates the dialectical approach. By showing both the protagonist and antagonist reaching a synthesis with the other's perspective, you further demonstrate how this third, balanced point of view is what this story is really trying to say. It's easy to think of the dialectic as pure conflict, especially in a society as divided as our own, but the point of an argument is (or should be) to find the truth about a contentious point, not prove the other perspective wrong. **It's not about fighting for victory, but for a restoration of balance between seemingly contradictory ideas.** This is why paradox and the transcendental are so often the basis of the best stories: the narrative craft is better at holding opposing truths in balance than perhaps any other mental framework besides honest and open debate.

Character change through conflict is the lifeblood of story, but, as with everything in storytelling, its impact isn't fully felt if it's just told to the reader. It has to be shown, and for the protagonist, this is where the direct connection between the inciting incident and the climax comes in. In almost every genre besides mystery, the protagonist knows who or what is responsible for the disruption of their equilibrium in the ordinary world at the beginning of the second act. The know, generally,

what they need to do to restore the balance: kill the monster, rescue the princess, find the MacGuffin, etc. But the forces of antagonism are too strong – or at the very least, the protagonist is too weak at the beginning of their story to even touch them. **The contrast between the protagonist at the beginning of the second act and the end of the second act is most clearly demonstrated in their ability to hold their own against forces of antagonism that they were formerly powerless to resist.** Thus, the growth of the protagonist is demonstrated through action in conflict, like all great storytelling. To have them say "I'm strong enough to fix this now" and end the story there robs the narrative of any lasting impact, and takes away the satisfaction of finally seeing the conflicts set up in the first act come to fruition. This is one of the big reasons why the "we're bringing the fight to them" endings of films like *Independence Day: Resurgence* and *Pacific Rim: Uprising* feel so flat and unexciting. It tries to move a story beat that should fall at the end of the second act of the next story into the third act of the one before, robbing it of the set up and build up it would have in its own story while also stealing the impact of a gratifying resolution to the story the film was supposed to be telling. And, as is the case with both of those sequels, the promised payoff to that cliffhanger never happened.

(On a side note, that's not to say that cliffhanger endings never work – they just have to be a satisfying conclusion to the story being told as well as a tease of what's to come – a difficult balancing act to pull off. Christopher Nolan's Batman films are a great example of this, with both *Begins* and *The Dark Knight* ending with a promise of change to come while still bringing their respective stories to an emotionally satisfying crescendo. The problem with the aforementioned sequels is simply that they tried to deliver a narrative and character moment that they hadn't earned.)

But we're getting a little sidetracked. The point I'm trying to make here is that by *showing* the protagonist to be powerless against the antagonist at the beginning of the narrative, then *showing* them grow, learn, and evolve, and finally *showing* them being going toe to toe with the antagonist at the climax, you provide a clear picture of the character arc of your protagonist that resonates on an emotional level, not just an intellectual one. We see and feel the growth of this person, and we empathize with it… so long as that growth is natural and organic to the story. If your protagonist gains the power to defeat their antagonist through an unearned *deus ex machina* or if your formerly invincible antagonist suddenly forgets their immense power in the final act to give the hero an opening, it will feel cheap. "Of course the protagonist was able to beat them!" your readers will say, "The writer put their hand on the scales!" This is, quite simply, bad story design. Sorry to keep bringing up bad sci-fi sequels that we'd all rather forget, but *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* is one of the most egregious offenders of this rule I've ever seen. In the first film in the series, Sam had a clear (if not terribly compelling) arc: growing from a selfish teenager to someone willing to risk his own life for the greater good. He

was able to defeat Megatron against all odds through a mechanism set up early in the story: placing the AllSpark in the chest of transformer will destroy both it and them. Simple, easy to keep track of, and a textbook example of a Chekov's Gun set up and paid off well. *Fallen,* while trying to run through many of the same beats, flubs all of them by having not one, but two *deus-ex-machina* moments and by making the primary antagonist forget half of their abilities in the final battle. Sam is killed and resurrected in autobot heaven for reasons not really made clear, and has the MacGuffin magically restored to him because of this, and then Optimus Prime, who has spent most of the film dead (and thus unable to change, learn, or grow), is resurrected and given a literal video game powerup in a way that wasn't even hinted at to allow him to defeat the bad guy. It's a mess of a climax that relies on flash over substance at every turn, and feels utterly hollow as a result.

This is why closely linking the inciting incident and the climax is so important. When the protagonist's world is disrupted, it should be immediately clear why they can't solve their problem right away (again, this must be shown, not told). **That way we, the reader or audience, know intuitively what they need in order to defeat their antagonist and restore what was lost.** In *The Lord of the Ring*, the biggest obstacles for Frodo are the sheer physical distance he has to cross, his lack of fighting skill, and an insufficient reserve of willpower for the task ahead. He needs help, and so a large part of the narrative revolves around building the fellowship, recruiting and redeeming Gollum/Smeagol as a guide, and eventually finding the personal strength to get the ring through Mordor… Though this fails in the end, and Sam carries him the last few miles. We see his growth through mistakes and failures, and when he returns to the Shire to find it taken over by Saruman in the final chapters, he and his fellow hobbits lead a rebellion and overthrow the wizard themselves, demonstrating even further the change they've undergone and the growth they've achieved. In *Dune*, Paul Atreides loses his family and future when they are betrayed by a rival house with the backing of the galactic emperor. Paul then spends the next several years building up power and gaining knowledge about the planet Arrakis before eventually leading a rebellion against the empire and taking the throne himself by threatening to destroy the spice: a natural product of the planet that makes space travel possible. And at the climax of *Inception*, Dom finally defeats his primary antagonist – his internalized guilt and shame for his wife's suicide, manifesting as a projection of her within his dreams. With the help of Ariadne, he finally comes to peace with what he did and the years they spent together in the dream world, finally allowing himself to move on.

In all of these examples, **the construction of the climax is closely linked to the forces of antagonism that disrupt the story world at the end of the first act and the growth of the characters through the course of the second.** Whether the conflict is external or internal, person vs person or person vs any number of impersonal forces, the strongest representative of the antithesis faces down a protagonist who is close

to reaching the synthesis. Whether those theses are as complicated as rival socio-political systems or as simple and primal as the will to survive in a hostile and uncaring world, the climax is where they collide in their fullest, strongest forms. This moment is not only possible within an organic narrative structure, but necessary if the protagonist and antagonist are properly constructed. **To create a strong conflict, the wants of both characters (or forces, etc.) should be so contradictory and necessary to both sides that neither one of them will give up without achieving their goal, and neither of them can achieve their own goal if the other succeeds.**

For instance, in *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker wants to tear down the empire and redeem his father, while Darth Vader wants to corrupt his son and hold onto the power of the dark side. The terms of both goals are mutually exclusive, and either one has to defeat the other permanently, or one of them has to change their position, as Vader does at the story climax. In *Les Misérables,* it's two value systems in conflict: Jean Valjean believes that people can and will do better if shown mercy and grace, while Inspector Javert believes that the law must be inflexible, ruthless, and merciless when punishing even the slightest mistake. In the end it is Valjean's position that wins out when his actions demonstrate the flaws of Javert's position to him, and as a result Javert commits suicide out of his inability to accept that fact. And in *The Martian*, it is Mark Watney's will to survive (and by extension, humanity's will to preserve life) that is brought into conflict with a world that, while not malicious, is uncaring and hostile by its very nature. His thesis – I will survive and get home – is challenged by the antithesis of the story world – I will kill you. The synthesis is found through Watney's adaptations to his environment, essentially presenting the solution as "I will survive by making this environment work for me." Because of the very structure of the story, the only tools he has to survive come from his environment, and only by cleverly repurposing them does he survive in the end.

There are literally millions of other examples of this, but I hope these make my point clear. **No matter what genre or level of stakes you have in your story, the climax moment is the final test: within the story world you have created, with the characters as they've been established, and with the growth of your protagonist as the linchpin of the premise… Which side wins the argument?** In other words, what is the premise of your story: what kind of person, what kind of system, or what kind of life is correct, just, and truthful? It's a question of values, of meaning in your story. In Robert McKee's *Story*, he says that meaning is, quote: "A revolution in values from positive to negative or negative to positive with a without irony – a value swing at maximum charge that's absolute and irreversible. The meaning of that change moves the heart of the audience." End quote. Meaning comes from change: defeat to victory, injustice to justice, death to life, hope to sorrow. This reversal, created by the actions of genuine characters in a consistent plot, is how you as the author state your case without just putting it in the mouth of

your protagonist. It's how you move and inspire people without preaching at them, and how you make sure your story stays with them long after they've put it down. And the most important part of that happens – at the climax.

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Thank you for listening to this episode of Homestead on the Corner! Today's climactic comments were written and produced by Trevor Van Winkle, and featured music from Lauren Baker.

Want to see me use these ideas in a real live story? Our new fiction podcast "The Sheridan Tapes" is now available on all podcasting platforms! 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 face the aftermath: what's left after the lightshow, and how your protagonist faces their victory or defeat. New episodes of this podcast are released 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.