Lesson 25 – Act Three: Resolution

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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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Phew! Man, these last few episodes have been a bit of a roller coaster! The protagonist has discovered great and terrible truths, been brought to their lowest point, made a life or death decision at the crisis, and finally faced their adversary head-on at the climax. We've shown them overcoming the very forces of antagonism that started them on this journey, demonstrating their growth as a person as well as illustrating the premise of the story in action through conflict. The big question of the story – what kind of person is this? – has now been answered. So… What's left for the third act?

After all, it seems like all the good stuff's done. The central conflict has ended, the characters' needs have either been met or consumed them, and all plot threads are, in an ideal story, tied up in a neat little bow at the climax. So why doesn't the story end the moment the antagonist is defeated? Why doesn't *Star Wars* just cut to black the moment the Death Star detonates? Why doesn't *Les Misérables* end as soon as Javert kills himself? Sure, it would be a bit of a bleak ending, but at least it wouldn't be as much of a downer as watching a sickly old Jean Valjean die surrounded by his weeping daughter and son-in-law.

Well – No. Obviously it wouldn't be a "better" ending. It might be neater structurally, but… Well, let me answer my own questions with another question: Would you be satisfied by those endings as an audience member or reader? Would a version of those stories without the last 5 minutes or the last few chapters feel as fulfilling? Would they stick with you the way the originals have?

Of course not… Though it's hard to say why. When the resolution drags on for too long, we tend to whine and moan about it… But films and books that do this tend to stick with us despite this complaint. Just look at *The Return of the King*, which has been constantly lambasted for its nearly 30 minute long final act since it was released. Yet I don't think anyone could reasonably argue that the film was an emotionally unsatisfying end to the trilogy. On the other hand, I can't think of one example of a book, film, or TV show that cut off the story immediately after the climax and has stuck with me. There are plenty with short,

sweet resolutions, but literally the only example of one that didn't include a real resolution that I can think of is a film I've already picked on this season: *Independence Day: Resurgence*, which pivots immediately from the end of the climax to a tease of the next film without giving the audience a chance to catch it's breath and process what just happened over the last two hours. As a result, the film feels even more messy, rushed, and unsatisfying that it already was.

In this lesson, I'll be diving into the last major structural beat of strong storytelling: the resolution. Its arrival marks the transition from act 2 to act 3 and the crossing of the threshold back into the ordinary world, and yet I often find that creative writing textbooks don't treat it with half as much detail as the other elements of the crisis, climax, and resolution trinity. But, as I shall demonstrate today, it is an utterly vital and versatile tool in the storyteller's arsenal, and one that all writers would be foolish to neglect or misuse. So, without further ado, let's dive into act 3 and the resolution.

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My biggest lesson about how to use the resolution came from writing one that didn't work. In October of 2019, I was on a writing trip in Langlois, Oregon. I was supposed to be working on the second draft of my next novel, but of course, I triple booked my time, so I was also writing *The Stars Eternal* and a Halloween special that ultimately went unproduced, but set the stage for *The Sheridan Tapes*. But in terms of what was written and actually came to fruition, *The Stars Eternal* was a more difficult script than I expected. The story itself had been in my head in various different forms for a long time, and I had a strong post-it note outline for the story… But it just wasn't working. After a lot of head scratching, reshuffling, and rewriting at a nearby coffee shop, I finally realized what the main problem was: the outline was too strong in the second act, and way too thin in the resolution department. For those who have listened to the story, suffice it to say that I originally ended the script right after Captain Aster quoted the Castaway's last words in her conversation with General Echo.

It made sense to do this in the outline phase. It clarified what had happened at the climax, hinted that Aster was able to remember her friend, and brought the episode full circle to the quote in the cold open. *And yet*… It didn't work. The story, big and bombastic as it already was, felt way too bleak with that ending. From an emotional and experiential level, that ending said: *The Castaway is dead, and these people will all be haunted by the part they played in making that happen.* I mean, the story was already pretty bleak to start with, but this just pushed the balance too far in that direction. Beyond that though, it just *didn't work*. It wouldn't be emotionally satisfying to the listener; i.e., it wouldn't provide them with a sense of hope or the full benefits of a cathartic release, but rather a dull, misplaced malaise that would be rejected and forgotten within a day or two.

Beyond the experience of the listener, it also didn't work thematically. Though there were a lot of competing ideas in the first draft, the theme of the story ultimately ended up being the ways in which those we've lost live on in our memories and actions. Everything from the way the Castaway's immortality works to the memory of their friend remaining with the crew of the *Elementis* feeds into this, and the ending I ultimately chose resolved this theme in a touching way: with the crew following the example of their adventurous, renegade friend and exploring the cosmos together. It reflected the themes, character arcs, and plotlines of the story in a way that fit the rest of the narrative in a way the original ending failed to do – in other words, *it worked.*

These two key reasons for changing my original outline demonstrate why a strong resolution is so important to a good story. **The resolution allows the audience time to experience an emotionally satisfying victory or catharsis at the end of the narrative, and demonstrates the full meaning of the thematic premise through action within the story.** The resolution is not only necessary to a complete narrative, but bestows a whole host of benefits to the story itself.

Let's discuss what the resolution does for your reader or audience first. In Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat*, he says, quote: "Whether it's a comedy or a drama, wringing out the emotions of the audience is the name of the game. Making it an emotional experience, using *all* the emotions, Is what it's about." End quote. When we sit down to read, watch, or listen to a story, we want to experience the full gamut of emotion, whether we know it or not. We want to laugh, cry, hope, despair, and love right alongside the protagonists. As someone who's spent the last five months writing a horror series, I know that people often come into a story to willingly experience some negative emotion such as fear, terror, disgust, and unease… sometimes on a weekly basis. Of course they do… storytelling helps us make sense of our own lives by showing us a metaphor for the good, the bad, and the ugly parts of life, turned up to 11. But putting those kinds of strong emotions on blast for two hours, 25 episodes, or 300 pages is exhausting to the reader or audience member, especially when it comes to the crisis and climax. In Robert McKee's *Story*, he says, quote: "if the Climax has moved the filmgoers, if they're laughing helplessly, riveted with terror, flushed with social outrage, wiping away tears, it's rude suddenly to go black and roll the titles. This is the cue to leave, and they will attempt to do so jangling with emotions." End quote.

Cutting off the experience of the story without giving the reader time to process it forces them to do so once they've left the safe space of the story itself and returned to their own busy, emotionally hectic lives. It turns what should have been an emotionally complete experience into one that is emotionally unresolved… which is quite literally one definition of trauma. To tell a story in such a way is not only clumsy and unfinished, but largely irresponsible to your reader. Some art house films or experimental novels may do so to force a certain emotion onto their audience, but you must have a very specific reason

to do so, along with a very specific audience in mind. Well-told stories have a deep emotional power over those who experience them, and to misuse that power, especially with a younger or more general audience, can lead to actual emotional and mental anguish.

This is, of course, the worse-case scenario, but as a rule of thumb, you should at least leave your readers or audience with space to breathe at the end of the narrative. If you're worried about losing your audience by slowing down the pace here, don't be: the resolution doesn't have to be long, and if they've already sat through the entire second act, you won't lose them if the story slows down in act 3. A lifetime of storytelling has taught us that they're supposed to slow down here, and they'll accept and appreciate the chance to mentally and emotionally process the roller coaster they've been on before they get off.

On that note, it's usually best to have the length of the resolution be determined by the length of the narrative as a whole. It's not an exact equation, but generally speaking, **a longer narrative will require a longer resolution, while a shorter one can get away with less time in the third act.** This is for two reasons: first, a longer narrative will generally have more dangling plot threads that need to be wrapped up after the climax, and second, if a reader or audience member has been with you in this story for several hours or, in the case of a series, several years, then they will want more time to unpack their emotions regarding the story and to say goodbye to these characters. The ending of the podcast *Wolf 359* does this beautifully, with a nearly 15 minute denouement at the end of the final episode… an ending nearly as long as some of the first season episodes, but beautifully paced to wrap up the narrative and resolve the character arcs. *Return of the King* also fits this category as the end of a ten hour plus film trilogy (and also, what most people think of as the third act isn't actually the resolution, because while the external want is satisfied at Mount Doom, Frodo's inner need is still unfulfilled until he leaves Middle Earth, so technically the resolution is just the last scene with Sam, and…)

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Okay. Rant aside, I think you get my point: **the more you have asked your readers to emotionally invest in the story, the more resolution they will need to unpack that emotion.** The role of a storyteller is, in many ways, to guide their audience through a specific emotional and intellectual experience – not to tell them how to feel, but to gently guide them towards a shared understanding of the narrative. Whether it's a classical hero's journey adventure or a twisting, labyrinthian nightmare of an antiplot, the role of the author is to invest the story with meaning and communicate it clearly to the audience – even if the emotion being communicated is confusion and fear. And that becomes clearest at the resolution, where your task switches from getting the protagonist from the inciting incident to the climax to guiding the audience towards the final emotional note you want to linger in their mind. Whether that emotion is positive, negative, melancholic, or

bittersweet, knowing what you want your reader to take from your story and skillfully guiding them towards it often what separates an okay story from one that stays with them for the rest of their life.

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The second reason that the resolution is so important is slightly more mechanical, but no less important. From a plot perspective, it may not be possible to bring all of your subplots to a satisfying conclusion at the main climax. After all, the end of the comic relief character's arc might feel out of place in the middle of a high-stakes battle between the protagonist and antagonist, and so it might be better to wrap it up before or after the climax. In other cases, the internal logic of the story might not allow certain subplots to be tied up before the climax. Two characters who need to be reconciled before the story ends are in two different locations at the overall story climax, and thus their story has to climax in the main story's resolution. This is something I had to do with my most recent novel: the two primary subplot characters split up just before the climax, with one taking an active role in the battle and the other supporting from afar by making sure all characters get where they need to be. Their final resolution scene, therefore, needed to be in the third act, after the primary conflict is resolved.

Just be sure that any subplot climaxes or resolutions in the third act don't emotionally contradict the main story's resolution. If a foil character needs to fail in their plotline, then try not to put that failure in the middle of a positive story resolution unless you want to taint or complicate the protagonist's success. **Again, there are ways to subvert these general principles, but you have to know why you're subverting them, what that subversion says to the audience, and why you are saying it from a thematic perspective.** And, with very few exceptions, you should not craft a narrative that asks readers to invest time, energy, emotion, and thought into a story that is by design unsatisfying or incomplete.

Ideally, you may want to have all plotlines resolve at or before the end of the climax, then keep the resolution as short as possible. This is a very strong and classical approach to storytelling. Most of Shakespeare's most famous plays resolve this way. Romeo and Juliet die a few pages before final curtain, all of the mistakes and mishaps of Messina are sorted out in the last scene of *Much Ado about Nothing*, Macbeth's ambition is frustrated and his head removed just before the final speech, and all plotlines converge and end in a pile of corpses at the end of *King Lear* with only a handful of lines to unpack what just happened. This approach, in other words, has a very high pedigree and a long history in English literature. It also has two added benefits for your story: it delays the climax and holds tension right up until the last moment (provided the writing itself can maintain the suspense), and keeps the resolution as short as possible. For certain types of stories, this is an ideal technique to utilize.

However, not all stories benefit from this kind of structure. In stories with more complex or subtle climaxes, a few extra scenes are required to unpack their meaning… or in the case of *Return of the King*, half an hour of extra scenes, but again, the story is not resolved at Mount Doom, Frodo is still dealing with unhealed emotional trauma right up until the moment he gets on the ship in the Grey Havens, and the story needed to communicate that to…

Record Scratch

Sorry – I do have a bit of a bee in my bonnet on that point. But I stand by it nonetheless. *The Lord of the Rings* is a very introspective, almost spiritual tale dressed up as a game of DND, utilizing its fantasy tropes to tell a story of temptation and corruption of innocence, fate, and eventual redemption that is only granted by being willing to leave the world behind. By cutting the scourging of the Shire from the film version, Peter Jackson and company unfortunately removed a final bit of conflict that might have helped make that final section of the story more palatable and kept the resolution from feeling too self-indulgent.

That brings up yet another important reason to resolve subplots in the final act. **If your story, like Tolkien's, requires a character's personal arc to conclude after the primary conflict has been resolved, holding back an important subplot's climax until the final act can help you hold your audience's interest long enough to get there.** In *Save the Cat*, Blake Snyder describes the primary subplot of your story (the "B-Story," in his terminology) as a "Booster Rocket" to help you get through the slower sections of the second act. This is, essentially, using the inciting incident of a subplot to provide narrative momentum during the break into act two – a technique that you can quite easily mirror by using the climax and resolution of a subplot as a "booster rocket" for your resolution. Again, just make sure that these scenes don't spoil the overall emotional effect of your resolution or the thematic premise of the story as a whole.

However, these scenes can be used quite effectively to deepen the resolution of your story by adding contradictions or qualifications to its overall meaning. Meaning is, according to Robert McKee in *Story,* 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." End quote. That swing in values happens or should happen, to one degree or another, at the end of every character's plotline. By carefully orchestrating these swings, you can enhance the meaning of one by contradicting it with another, forcing the audience to examine why one character succeeded while another failed. This, again, guides your audience towards a deeper understanding of your story's premise and deepens their emotional understanding of the narrative.

There are many other techniques and styles that can be used when writing a resolution, but like all techniques in storytelling, what you do with this beat is largely determined by the kind of story you're telling

and what kind of meaning you want it to have. In other words, the resolution and its inverse relationship with the crisis/climax and midpoint all depend on your premise. A premise, as defined in lesson 11, should include **values in conflict, a moral argument, and, if possible, some element of irony or paradox.** This is the seed from which your entire story springs, and as you can see from this and the last 12 lessons, the whole story is contained in this one statement. You have your protagonist, antagonist, ordinary and extraordinary worlds, rising conflict, midpoint, crisis, climax, and now, resolution. You have the complex and multi-layered meaning of your story contained in the central paradox of your premise; a paradox that you should, to one degree or another, resolve in the third act. **The resolution, first and foremost, is about creating meaning out of everything that came before, and gently guiding your reader towards that meaning with the skill and patience of a master storyteller.**

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

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Next episode, the protagonist returns to the ordinary world having braved the trials and tribulations of the extraordinary, ready to bring the lessons they learned home. New episodes of this podcast are released every other 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.