Chapter Four

Deep Structure

There are no dull subjects. / There are only dull writers.

—H.L. Mencken

You have made two major decisions to this point. You have an idea (sort of), and you've picked the strong force of your plot. What do you do next?

Before you try to figure out which plot pattern best suits your story, you must develop the idea for your story so that you can develop the deep structure.

Deep structure, like the strong force, guides development of your idea.

The central concept of deep structure is morality. Now don't freak out and think I'm saying that writing should somehow reflect the Ten Commandments or the precepts of Jesus or good, clean living. My use of the word *morality* here is much more basic than the meanings that first come to mind in our society.

Every piece of literature and every film ever made carries within it a moral system. It doesn't matter how artistic or rotten that work is, it contains a moral structure that gives us a sense of the world and how it ought to be. Either directly or indirectly, fiction tells us how to behave and how not to behave, what is right and what is wrong. It tells us what is acceptable behavior and what is unacceptable. This moral system holds only for the world created within that fiction. A work of fiction may reflect the same moral standards most of us share, or it may suggest that it's all right and maybe even desirable to cheat, lie, steal and sleep with your neighbor. The criminal isn't punished; in fact, she's rewarded.

It may be that the author is sloppy or lazy and doesn't understand or develop that moral system. It gets included by default and may be muddled, but it's there nonetheless. In bad works of writing we don't take these moral systems seriously; we dismiss them at face. In more serious works, in which the author is concerned with the implications of his moral system, it becomes serious food for thought; it becomes part of the message of the work itself. It doesn't matter if you're writing a romance, a mystery or the sequel to *Finnegan's Wake*. There's a world of difference between Albert Camus, whose works include a sophisticated system of morality, and a romance from Harlequin or Silhouette, which includes a simplistic moral system.

Your work, at least by implication, asks the question, "How should I act in these given circumstances?" Since every writer takes sides (a point of view), you tell your readers what's correct and incorrect behavior.

Take the book and film *Shane*.

Shane is a morality play. At the beginning, Shane comes out of the hills from nowhere (and back to nowhere at the end), which has had critics compare him to a frontier Jesus Christ, the Greek god Apollo, Hercules and a knight errant. Shane is a mysterious man, but he has a strong code of behavior. He brings his strength to the homesteaders, which gives them strength to fight the greedy, cruel cattlemen. Even when Shane is tempted by the homesteader's wife, Marion, he remains at all times dedicated to his moral system. We are left with nuances, moments of electricity between her and Shane, but he doesn't waver. Shane is a moral standard. He brings faith to the valley and the wicked are destroyed.

The morality of *Shane* parallels our Judeo-Christian ethics. We recognize proper behavior. Other works might suggest behavior that runs contrary to what we've been taught. The wicked aren't always destroyed. Sometimes they come out on top. Crime *does* pay.

As writers, we have the right to choose whatever moral system

we want to portray and draw whatever conclusions we want from that system. But if we really want to reach someone, we must be *convincing*.

Easier said than done.

Most of what we read isn't very convincing when it gets down to the core morality of the work. If you write a serious book, you want to create an argument for this kind of behavior that is so powerful it will affect the reader in her own life. A tough task. If you write a book for entertainment only, however, your goal is simpler: You want to create an argument that works in the world of the book. It doesn't have to carry over into the world and change lives. Only the greatest of works and most talented of writers have the genius to affect our lives in large ways. I suspect good works (as opposed to great works) affect us in small ways. Even bad works affect us.

What is this argument? How do you make it convincing? The argument is the heart of your deep structure, and you must know how to fashion that argument so it's convincing.

A WORD ABOUT TWO-TIMING

Our way of dealing with the complications of the world is to simplify them into either/or arguments. We divide the world into opposites. We try, in vain, to make everything black and white.

We know the world isn't that simple, that most of life is in the gray range. But our way of thinking is so dedicated to opposites that it's impossible to escape them. Everything is good or bad, ugly or beautiful, light or dark, up or down, rich or poor, weak or strong, happy or sad, protagonist or antagonist. We divide the world to better comprehend it. We divide to simplify. Instead of an infinite number of states, we pretend there are only two.

It doesn't take much to realize this perception won't do if we're trying to get serious about the true nature of love, happiness or whatever. You must give up black-and-white thinking and examine the grays. The trouble with grays, however, is that there are no easy solutions.

Therein lies the key.

Easy solutions are . . . easy. They represent clichéd thinking. Good vs. bad. One character is kind-hearted, brave, sincere and on a mission, but the other character is dark-hearted, cowardly, insincere and intent on stopping the good character from reaching his goal. We know this pattern inside out—so well, in fact that we don't have to read the rest of the story. We know who's supposed to win and who's supposed to lose, and we know *why*. There won't be many surprises here. White hats vs. black hats. And because the readers know they're supposed to root for the good guy and despise the bad guy, the writer really can't put any twists in the story. Unless the reader is in a really perverse mood, she's been pulling for the good guy all along—and then he doesn't make it? Definitely a Hollywood taboo.

There's no challenge here. As a writer, you may dazzle us with your fancy footwork (the action), but underneath it all is nothing. Sure, no one cares about the moral universe of Indiana Jones or James Bond. They're good guys, and good guys fight evil, period. Strip away the action, and there's nothing left.

The author's task is to move into the world of grays, where there are no obvious or even right answers. Into a world where decisions are always risky because you aren't sure if they're the right decisions. The author who takes a simplistic point of view isn't interested in understanding the complex human dynamics of life or the difficulty of decisions we must make.

The deep tension (as opposed to local tension) I talked about in the earlier chapter comes from impossible situations, situations where there is no clear right or wrong, no clear winner or loser, no clear yes or no. *Put your main character between a rock and a hard place.* That's the true source of tension in fiction.

HOW TO GET BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

We each have our prejudices, rooted in our own moral system. If you were a god and could fashion any world you wanted, your fiction would reflect that world. In your world, crime would never go unpunished. Or ex-wives or husbands. Or politicians. In your world, the Chicago Cubs might win the World Series; the Indianapolis Colts might win the Super Bowl. The mind boggles at the opportunities for you to set things straight—at least on paper. You're a god, remember? You can do what you want.

If you still entertain any delusions of grandeur about being all-

powerful, this is the time to lose them. The writer is a slave, not a god. You're a slave to your characters and to the premise of your story. If you must find a model to represent the status of the author, it would be not as a god but as a referee.

Conflict depends on conflicting forces. In the one corner you have a force (let's say the protagonist), and the force has an objective: to win, to solve, to free . . . always an infinitive. In the other corner you have an opposing force (the antagonist), and this force has an objective too: to block the protagonist. That's important to plot, and it's been drilled into you since you were old enough to read. Little Red Riding Hood's objective is to reach Grandmother's house. The wolf's objective is to eat Little Red Riding Hood. And so on.

The same concept of opposing forces applies to ideas as well. *Writing a story without presenting a meaningful opposing force is propaganda.*

Let me explain. As a writer you have your point of view—your prejudices, if you will. Let's say you were a battered wife for twelve years, the victim of a controlling and abusive husband. When you go to write about it, the story unfolds as it happened:

He storms in from work at night, throws his jacket down on the sofa and demands, "What's for dinner?"

"I made you a lovely duck à l'orange, dear." The table is set with their best china and crystal; the candles are lit. She's obviously gone to a lot of trouble for him.

"Duck! You know I hate duck. *Can't you ever do anything right?* Make me a sandwich."

A tear collects in the corner of her eye, but she accepts his abuse stoically. "What kind of sandwich?"

"I don't care," he says abruptly. "And get me a beer."

He turns on the television and is gone.

Enough.

I don't have to go on. You know the score and you know the story. The characters are already defined as types. She is the silent-suffering, kind-hearted, devoted wife; he is the loud, obnoxious, cruel husband. You can't wait for him to get his comeuppance. You hope he suffers.

But this is propaganda.

Propaganda?

The author's point of view here is obvious and one-sided. I've sided with the wife and have exaggerated her just as I've exaggerated the husband beyond belief. They're *types*. "Begin with an individual and you find that you have created a type," wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald, "begin with a type and you find that you have created—nothing." The author is trying to settle a personal score. The fiction may be therapeutic and help the writer work out hostility, but that's not the purpose of fiction if you intend to show it to someone else. The purpose of fiction is to tell a story, not to get even or to work out your own personal problems.

You can always tell propaganda because the writer has a cause. The writer is on a soapbox lecturing, telling us who is good and who is bad and what is right and what is wrong. Lord knows we get lectured to enough in the real world; we don't read or go to the movies so someone else can lecture to us some more. If you use your characters to say what *you* want them to say, you're writing propaganda. If your characters say what *they* want to say, you're writing fiction. Isaac Bashevis Singer claimed characters had their own lives and their own logic, and that the writer had to act accordingly. You manipulate characters in the sense that you make them conform to the basic requirements of your plot. You don't let them run roughshod over you. In a sense, you build a corral for your characters to run around in. The fence keeps them confined to the limitations of the plot. But where they run *inside* the corral is a function of each character's freedom to be what or who he/she wants *within the confines of the plot itself.*

Jorge Luis Borges said it best: "Many of my characters are fools and they're always playing tricks on me and treating me badly."

More of a slave than a god.

How, then, do you avoid writing propaganda? First start with your attitude. If you have a score to settle or a point to make, or if you're intent on making the world see things *your* way, go write an essay. If you're interested in telling a story, a story that grabs us and fascinates us, a story that captures the paradoxes of living in this upside-down world, write fiction.

Start with a premise, not a conclusion. Start with a *situation.*

Let's go back to our married couple. She was the saint and he was Satan. Not very interesting. Why not? Too one-sided. The story can't go anywhere. We'll side with the saint because we have no sympathy for or understanding of Satan. Our emotional response is just as stock as the characters: "Poor dear, why does she put up with it? C'mon, honey, *fight back!*" And to him we say, "You dumb, cruel S.O.B. Boy, are you going to get it!" That story is on autopilot; it doesn't need a writer or a reader.

The fatal flaw in the story is its blatant one-sidedness. She's too good, and he's too bad. Life doesn't work that way. As human beings, we all contain a light and a dark side, and real characterizations capture that without prejudice. What is the dark side of the wife? In what way is she responsible for this horrible state of affairs? And what about him? Yes, he's cruel and abusive, but how did he get that way? In his own way, he's as much a victim as she is. When you stop taking sides and start thinking about these two as *people*, you begin to understand why they act as they do. The difference is that the author is interested in writing about the *situation* and writing about it fairly. Let the characters duke it out if they want, but you're the referee, and you must make sure that the situation is the prime concern. Don't let a character take control of the situation to the extent that it becomes one-sided. Make sure they stay in the ring together, and give them equal time. John Cheever made the point: "The legend that characters run away from their authors—taking up drugs, having sex operations and becoming president—implies that the writer is a fool with no knowledge or mastery of his craft. The idea of authors running around helplessly behind their cretinous inventions is contemptible." The referee, not the characters, controls the situation.

A good example to study of the husband-wife story that shows two real people struggling to put their lives in order is Robert Benton's film, *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), with Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep. It's a moving story because there is no villain. Both characters are caught between a rock and a hard place. There are no clear and "right" decisions. Joanna Kramer "abandons" her son and her marriage, but we understand what drove her to that extreme, and when she comes back later to fight for her son, we understand why she's come back. We feel for both parties and we feel their mutual agony. Nothing is easy here. There's no one to root for, no villain we can point our finger at and say, "*You!*"

What we get in *Kramer vs. Kramer* are opposing views: the wife's point of view *and* the husband's point of view. The two points of view clash. The clash gives us conflict. Opposing views means you're responsible for giving not just one argument, but two separate arguments, each of which opposes the other. This is the essence of being between a rock and a hard place.

Tolstoy captured this idea perfectly: "The best stories don't come from 'good vs. bad' but from 'good vs. good.' "

Kramer vs. Kramer is a story of "good vs. good." And the trick to capturing "good versus good" is in the quality of the opposing arguments.

HOW TO CREATE OPPOSING ARGUMENTS

Opposing arguments are the result of irreconcilability. They grow when there is no definitive answer to a problem; there are only temporary, operational solutions that may work in a certain place on a certain day but not in all places on all days. Most of the great issues of our day are irreconcilable: abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, divorce, custody, homosexuality, revenge, temptation—to name a few. The hottest irreconcilable argument today in the United States is that of abortion. There are two arguments, one for each side of the issue. Either abortion is wrong because it is murder of an unborn child, or it's not wrong because an unviable fetus cannot be considered a living thing. This is a simple rendition of the arguments, which are much more complex, of course, but the point is that the issue is seen from completely different points of view, from opposite sides of the fence. There is no absolute solution, only temporary ones, which come in the form of Supreme Court decisions such as *Roe vs. Wade*, and even then, those decisions are subject to review and reversal. Sure, we have our own personal belief: Abortion is wrong or not, and we subscribe to one or the other argument. We take sides. But is it the author's role to take sides when writing fiction? If you think it is, you're writing propaganda: Your characters are in

service to the idea *you* want to get across. If you think it's the author's responsibility to tell the best story possible and not preach, you have little choice but to present a situation that includes *both* sides of the argument sympathetically. Only then is your character between a rock and a hard place.

Both arguments should be logical. If you're serious about presenting both sides of an issue and capturing your character in the middle, it's important that both sides of the issue be valid. Don't put all your energy into the solution you prefer and then create a weak argument that represents the opposite view in a token way. That's cheating. For every point you make on one side of the argument, show an equally powerful point on the other side of the argument. If you don't, the reader will see through you, and you'll lose the source of your conflict.

Both arguments should be valid. By *valid* I mean well-founded. We should recognize the arguments as being truly possible arguments in our world. Let's return to the irreconcilability of the topic of abortion and create a woman who is caught unmercilessly between both arguments. Her name is Sandy and she's a deeply religious woman. A Catholic. Her religion has told her all her life that abortion is a mortal sin. She believes what her church has taught her and in her soul she believes abortion is wrong.

Then Sandy's raped. The violence shakes her emotionally.

Then she finds out she's pregnant.

The law says she's entitled to an abortion on demand. Sandy hates the fetus growing inside her; every day she is reminded of the awful crime against her. The thought of having her rapist's child is more than she can take. The child would always be a reminder. But her religion says she will be damned if she has the abortion.

Damned in this life if she doesn't have an abortion and damned in the next life if she does. Classic irreconcilability. Both arguments are logical, and they're both valid. How can she save herself? Or should she sacrifice herself to bear the child? She could give the child up for adoption—but then, the child is half *hers* too. The more she seeks a solution, the less chance there seems to be in finding one. This is the true source of conflict.

Both arguments should be compelling. *Logical* and *valid* are not enough in and of themselves. They are intellectual aspects. For an argument to be compelling, it should appeal to us emotionally as well. As a writer, you aren't concerned with teaching your reader the "right" thing to do under these circumstances. You're concerned with putting the reader in the shoes of your protagonist, making the reader "feel" for Sandy and understand the complexity of her dilemma, so the reader understands that there are no easy solutions and that someone, anyone, who has the misfortune to have this happen would suffer terribly.

That is the essence of a compelling argument.

There you have it. To develop deep structure, you must develop an irreconcilable argument that has two mutually exclusive sides, both of which are equally logical, valid and compelling.

SOMETIMES DOING THE RIGHT THING IS WRONG AND SOMETIMES DOING THE WRONG THING IS RIGHT

Let's take a closer look at the whole question of good and evil.

There are two worlds. One is the "oughta be" world and the other is the "as is, where is" world. The "oughta be" world is the one we'd like to live in. In this world, good is good and evil is evil and the division between the two is as large as the part in the Red Sea. When situations occur, the decisions are obvious, the results clear. However . . .

The world we live in has few clear decisions and probably even fewer clear results. The water is rarely, if ever, clear. The black-and-white world of "oughta be" gives way to a hundred shades of gray in the "as is, where is" world. We know how we should act in different situations, but when those situations come up in our lives, *it's never that clear or easy*.

Sometimes situations force us to reexamine what is right and what is wrong. We've all been in situations where doing the right thing was obviously the wrong thing to do, and in situations where doing the wrong thing was obviously right. It may start with something simple, such as telling a little white lie to spare someone's feelings. Or it may end up with a decision to do something of catastrophic proportions. That's when the phrases *the end justifies the means* and *rules are made to be broken* come in handy.

If the morality in your work deals with traditional concepts of right and wrong and the basic moral dilemmas that we are all faced with at some point in our lives, take a closer look at those dilemmas. Forget easy solutions. They don't help and they rarely work. Worse, they're of little comfort for the character who must suffer through a complicated moral issue when all he has are a bunch of clichés at hand. We live in the "as is, where is" world, and the issues that plague us (and our characters) most are the ones that defy simple solutions.

Gray areas allow irreconcilability, where action is neither wrong nor right. In the absence of absolute solutions ("this is *always* the right thing to do"), there must be artificial or operational ones, ones that work for your character in those specific circumstances. What is "right" in our society is often decided arbitrarily by artificial means (by the courts or by social consensus, for instance), but life constantly throws situations at us in which abiding by the law is wrong. Effect? Moral dilemma. Do you obey the law? Or do you break the law for what you consider a greater good? Where do you draw the line? *How* do you draw the line?

These are the real issues that confront us every day.

Whatever approach you take to your story, and whatever kind of moral system is at work, try to develop your idea so that you create the dynamic tension of irreconcilability. Be consistent and be fair to both sides of the issue.

Chapter Five

Triangles

What is character but the determination of incident? / What is incident but the illustration of character?

—Henry James

This chapter is about the relationship between character and plot. It's strange, in a way, to separate the discussion of character from the other elements—it's like talking about each part of a car engine individually and not how the parts all work together—but some considerations of character as they relate to plot bear discussion. The previous chapters included discussion about characters to some degree because I wanted you to see how the primary elements relate and depend on each other. You don't separate these elements when you write. Everything comes to bear all at once. I don't know of any writer who sits down at the word processor and says, "Okay, this morning I'm going to write character." And yet that's how most books treat the subject: "Okay, now we're going to talk about character." Henry James is right: When a character *does* something, he becomes that character, and it's the character's act of doing that becomes your plot. The two depend on each other.

First let's look at the dynamics of character in plot.

People relate to each other. When Alfred (A) walks into a room and sees Beatrice (B) for the first time, he falls in love. Alfred asks Beatrice out but she tells him to get lost. The story is under way.

The character dynamic here is two. That doesn't mean it's two because there are two people, but because there are a maximum