CHAPTER SIX

INSIDE STRUCTURE
Swimming in the Deep End

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
as those move easiest who have learned to dance.

~ ALEXANDER POPE

Structure—That Dirty Little Word

Story structure is the part of the writing process we all love to hate. It's too rigid, too predictable, too confining, and way too *un*-artistic. Yet without structure our stories just won't hold together. Actually, there isn't much in this world that can hold together without it. Form and structure are an essential part of nature; the very bodies we inhabit, the molecules of air we breathe, all plant and animal life exist in a functional form based on sound evolutionary development. So why would a film script be exempt from this principle?

If you think about it, *all* art is contained in some kind of form. Paint doesn't just hang in the air; it needs a canvas. Musical notes played merely at random are only a cacophony of sounds. Architects don't dump a pile of wood on the ground and call it a house; they have builders organize the lumber in a manner that gives definition to their creative vision. But don't be disheartened; **as the process of writing ceases to be a mystery, you can look past the boundaries it creates and find opportunities for unique self-expression.**

Perhaps more than any other literary endeavor, screenwriting is a creative form that is dependent on its ability to speak to an extremely

broad and diversified audience. To reach such a wide group of people, the creative impulse or inspiration that ignites the screenwriter *must,* at some point, be translated into a recognizable form. That form has a customary (though not necessarily rigid) structure.

When studying the screenplay form, it becomes clear that there are certain recurring characteristics that are consistent in nearly all great films. Breaking these elements down and identifying their functions offers the writer tremendous insight and clarity into what gives a cinematic story its unique shape and appearance. But this doesn't mean that a writer must be limited to using structure only in ways that are tried and true. To the contrary, great artists—which, of course, includes great filmmakers—are able to take existing knowledge and stretch it to new limits. The more a writer understands the dynamics of how story structure works, the better use he or she can make of it.

Certainly, there have been writers who've created cinematic masterpieces without so much as a passing conscious thought to form and structure. However, that kind of a spontaneous system for achieving excellence is extremely difficult to duplicate every time. If your creative impulses are flowing freely toward perfection, then by all means get out of the way and let them pour forth. But if that flow dies down to a trickle, don't assume it's because you're all dried up. When the process of connecting words to express images, ideas, and emotions becomes excruciatingly difficult or confusing, it can merely be a signal that you must dig even deeper into those dark, internal places where self-discovery and self-truths are often hidden or buried. Especially under these circumstances, understanding the form and structure of a story is an excellent tool to help you trench your way back through the mire and complexity into the mainstream of the great story that is struggling to emerge.

One of the primary reasons some screenwriters spurn the idea of structure is that it is often taught or explained as a set of arbitrary rules and requirements that feel antithetical to the creative process. Artistically, writers don't want to assemble a script in the same manner that a mechanic would build a carburetor: each piece die-cast to fit perfectly

into an assembly-line replica of all the others. Following arbitrary guidelines or following guidelines arbitrarily can lead to very stilted, unimaginative, benign writing. Art can never be a calculated risk. As soon as you enter the safety zone of merely filling in a form, you severely diminish the possibility of tapping into those interior regions where sacred originality and profound insights dwell.

The Dynamic Duo

True story structure is organic, not arbitrary or manufactured. It is the natural form a story wants to take. The origin of that natural form evolves from a basic law of nature that says:

THINGS CHANGE
The result of change is *movement...*
The result of movement is *progress...*
The result of progress is a *new order...*
The result of a new order is *new life...*

RESISTANCE to this natural process of change impedes the movement toward renewed life. Yielding to change *RELEASES* the flow back into new life. For human beings it is a natural process to constantly pass in and out of conditions of *resistance* and *release*. These two dynamics form a tension that we see everywhere in nature: waves crest on the ocean, birds flap their wings, hearts beat, and pulses throb. The pattern of *resistance* and *release* generates the pounding drumbeat of life.

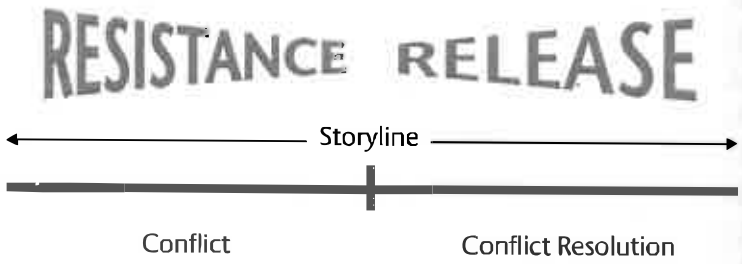
Resistance and release also defines the nature of conflict and resolution. **A conflict is a conflict precisely because there is resistance to the solution.**

Resistance doesn't necessarily mean that an answer or solution isn't desired or worked toward; it just means that the information, perspective, or perception surrounding an existing dilemma isn't sufficient to solve or resolve it at the time. The harder an issue is to solve, the greater the conflict; the greater the conflict, the harder it is to get to the solution. This causes resistance to increase and tension to escalate.

But *resistance* can't intensify indefinitely. At some point, like an overextended rubber band, the tension will reach a breaking point and *release* will follow. No squabble, argument, dispute, or war in history has ever gone completely unresolved. Some sort of reconciliation, compromise, peace treaty, overthrow, invasion, beheading, or surrender occurred that released the conflict toward a resolution and established a new order. It wasn't necessarily a better order, and no one necessarily won or lost. In fact, you can bet that the new order brought about a new set of conflicts, and the pattern of *resistance and release* was set back into motion.

This is also true in human relationships. Take adolescence, for example: Every milestone in a young person's development marks a hard-fought battle for independence. Parents generally don't loosen their grip on a child's boundaries until there is solid evidence of increased maturity. Likewise, it's impossible to imagine a successful marriage that hasn't had to endure relentless overt and covert battles over power and control.

If a story is to ring true in terms of conveying the human experience, then this pattern of *resistance and release* is perhaps the most basic element of an organic story structure. It represents the rudimentary view of conflict and conflict resolution that begins to set up the structural pattern.



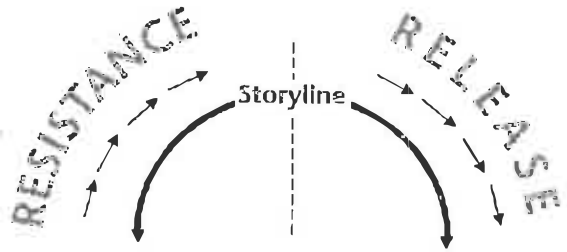
Notice that the *storyline* that runs the length of the *resistance and release* pattern has been bisected. This is to indicate that these are two halves of the same whole. Of course, the word *half* is a relative term, because no story should be held hostage to such a fixed ideal. However,

conceptually it does help to see this principle in terms of two complete halves, because in that ratio they help to hold the story in balance. In other words, if you set your story conflict into motion and begin to resolve it by page 30, what are you going to write about to fill in the other eighty pages left in the screenplay? Conversely, if you keep layering conflict on top of conflict, with no movement toward resolution until you are three-quarters of the way into the script, the climax and resolution are going to feel forced and underdeveloped.

As the structural model becomes more and more detailed in the following chapters, you will find that holding this pattern of *resistance and release* in some sort of balance will help you establish and maintain a stronger and more powerful dramatic tension in your script.

A Bend in the Road

In terms of story development, this principle of *resistance and release* causes the story to naturally rise and fall, in effect forming an *arc* with its movement. As the conflict escalates, it climbs to an apex, where something causes it to shift and then descend into the resolution.



Story does not exist in a static environment; as in all aspects of life, it is ever-changing and progressing. The arc represents this movement in the human experience, which is non-random because it is directed toward a *goal*. In story, again as in life, that goal is the attempt to resolve a conflict by overcoming obstacles.

Think about something as simple as setting off for work in the morning and not being able to find your car keys. At first you may casually look

in all the usual places, but as the minutes tick away your situation becomes more and more desperate. Your actions don't get calmer; they become more frenetic. "Where are those darn keys!" you explode at your kids, as if the five-year-old snuck out in the middle of the night for a joy ride. Pillow cushions get tossed, drawers slammed, pockets turned inside out, but none of these actions are going to necessarily bring you your desired results. You are in the first half of the arc, where *resistance* to the goal is escalating.

From here there are several possible scenarios: 1) You calm yourself down, retrace your actions from the night before, and remember that you entered the house with an armload of dry cleaning, which is where you find your keys, ensnared in a tangle of hangers; 2) you finally give up and call a locksmith, who comes to make you a new key; 3) you trip over your five-year-old's toy, twist your ankle, and call your boss to say you're in too much pain to come to work; 4) you don't trip over your child's toy, but you call your boss with the same *lame* excuse and decide to worry about the keys and your job tomorrow morning.

Notice the scenario that isn't even considered—you keep looking for your keys forever, never finding them, never going to work again, never leaving the house to buy groceries; you just spend the rest of your life relentlessly searching for your keys. That would be absurd. **All conflict has a breaking point, where our resistance to the solution is shifted toward a resolution, even if it's not the original resolution we had in mind.** This shift represents the apex of the arc. As a story moves up the arc, the need to resolve the conflict grows in intensity, but at some point something occurs that breaks the tension and brings a solution into consciousness. This begins to release the story toward a resolution, putting it on the downhill side of the arc.

Essentially, the arc works with gravitational pull. As with climbing a mountain, or ascending in a roller coaster, the higher one goes, the more energy it takes, causing resistance to escalate. At the apex of the arc, tension is released and this creates a descent that will escalate in speed and velocity. According to Newton's basic law of physics: the higher

the ascent, the steeper the fall; the steeper the fall, the greater the momentum. This can make getting to the resolution not only precarious, but downright dangerous and unpredictable.

Dramatic? I would say so, which is why Newton, whether he knew it or not, has also given us one of the basic laws of organic story structure:

All drama begins with an escalation of tension and is resolved as the tension deescalates. Don't underestimate the power of working with this simple principle. Your protagonist can't resolve a conflict that hasn't been established and developed; what would he or she be resolving? This doesn't mean that a writer can't play with the story in terms of starting at the end, or arranging the linear story elements completely out of order. It does mean, however, that no matter what device is used, the conflict will still rise and fall. For example, if the writer wants the audience to witness the climax in the opening scene, as in *Memento*, then the climax must be used, in effect, to introduce the conflict. If the story is told out of sequential order, as in *Pulp Fiction*, then the new order will still hold this rise and fall of the conflict. If it doesn't, the audience simply won't be able to track the story, and/or they will feel so confused that they will never become engaged enough to care about the outcome.

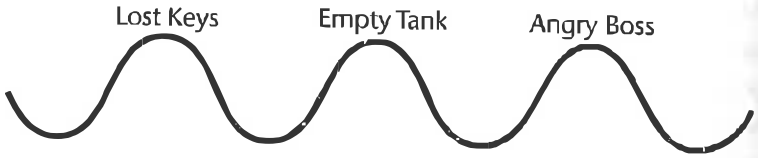
The Pattern of Life

The limitation of this simple arc pattern is that it is free-floating, in that it begins and ends abruptly because it is not connected to anything. If story is a reflection of our lives in motion, then no conflict that we encounter can be free-floating or disconnected from everything else. **All conflict is part of a developmental continuum that comes from somewhere in our past and takes us to someplace new, opening the**

door to our future. Therefore, there must be a trail that leads into and out of this arc that represents where we've been, where we are, and where we're going.

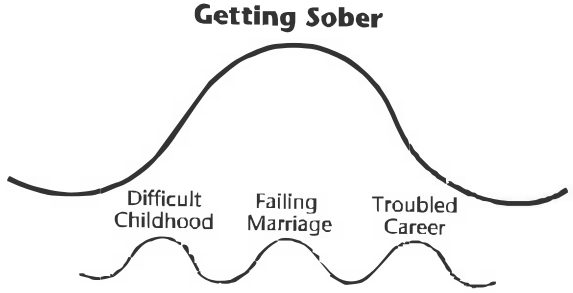
For example, after you find your keys you leave for work, but because you were running late, you neglect to check your gas tank and you run out of gas on the freeway. Now, only because you solved the first problem do you get to the second dilemma, and even after you resolve the gas crisis you still have to face your employer, who's not interested in excuses because this is the fifth time you've been late in the past two weeks.

Instead of being a singular arc, the loss of the keys is now part of a series of arcs, representing past, present, and future conflicts that need to be resolved:



Notice how the arcs are connected by a continuous rise and fall; the ending to one problem opens the pathway to encountering and resolving the next. Of course, the stories that we write aren't usually about things as mundane or trivial as losing keys and running out of gas. Those tend to be some of the behavioral details that are embedded into the greater arcs of our stories, where the protagonist loses his job because he's continually late and irresponsible, which is the by-product of alcoholic behavior that has been aggravated by a recent divorce. Irresponsibility, alcoholism, and divorce are all factors that had a history of conflict and resolution prior to the moment the new story began. Drinking, for example, may have been the solution to an unhappy childhood, and for awhile it might have actually worked at numbing the pain caused from abusive parents. But that same numbness may also have become the catalyst for irresponsibility and the inability to maintain an intimate marital relationship.

Notice that any one of these arcs would yield a complete story within itself. They also could become individual incidents that could produce a story in an even greater context, which might look at the overarching question of whether or not this character can get sober. His troubled childhood, the loss of his marriage, and the damage to his career may represent the intensification of the conflict that finally forces him to take a very serious look at his life.



The Sphere of Influence

One of the most interesting aspects of this rise and fall pattern formed by the arcs is that if any one of the arcs were turned inward on itself, it would form a *circle*. The circle is a very ancient symbol of wholeness.

But this particular circle is in reality a never-ending cycle of expansive growth and development, which means that the arc pattern never actually closes in on itself completely. Instead of becoming a finite

circle, it essentially develops into a continuous circling pattern that forms a *spiral* created from arc after arc folding in on itself.

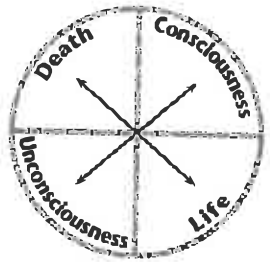
In her book *Signs and Symbols,* Clare Gibson explains that, "In common with the circle, the spiral shares the symbolism of continuity and cyclical movement, but it also signifies involution and evolution: While it contains elements of the old order, it branches out into new spheres and thus represents change and development."[1] The symbolism of the arc, therefore, reiterates the most predominant, recurring theme of this book: *Story structure is a reflection of the natural movement of the life process because...*

IT REPRESENTS CHANGE AND GROWTH

From Here to Quaternity

The change and development that brings about the constant renewal of life is dependent on the attempt to reconcile or bring into balance opposing forces within us all: Masculine seeks feminine, shadow seeks light, chaos seeks clarity, and ignorance seeks wisdom. In order for any and all of these conflicting opposites to find a balance that resolves the tension between them, what is *unconscious (unknown)* at the beginning of the story must become *conscious (known)* by the end. This will bring what was *dying (the fatal flaw of character)* into a new stage of *life (transformation).* The union of these two sets of interrelated opposites forms a powerful quaternity, which is a four-fold symmetry that symbolizes wholeness.

[1] Clare Gibson, *Signs & Symbols: An Illustrated Guide to Their Meaning and Origins* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996), 81.



***Consciousness* and *unconsciousness, life* and *death* are the two primary sets of opposites that are *always* at play in the human experience, which is why they are also *always* at play in the human story.** In our personal dramas, each individual sex (male and female) is constantly struggling to *know* the other; different parts of our nature (e.g., intellect, aptitude, self-image, etc.) are always striving to *connect* with their opposites. In the larger social and cultural drama, these tensions are often manifested between the haves and the have-nots, the powerful and the weak, the old and the young, the righteous and the corrupt, and so on.

From this perspective, films such as *Schindler's List* and *Casablanca* aren't only about opportunistic men caught in the crossfire of history who must make selfless choices to help others survive. In an even greater sense they are stories about people (just like us), caught between the desire to stand alone and the need to be connected to others. The dynamic tension between this type of conscious and unconscious split is part of all of our lives, and it constantly demands that we make choices. In *Schindler's List* and *Casablanca*, the underlying question is: Who do we serve, our *Self* or *Others*?

The snare here is that, again, there is no right answer. Where there is tension (conflict, disharmony) there is an imbalance in the *force* between the opposing energies. One side is getting too much attention and the other side is getting too little.

SELF VS. OTHERS

In the case of these two films, both Oskar Schindler and Rick Blaine are so consumed with their own selfish needs that they have lost contact with the needs of others. This leaves them isolated and alone, even though they are surrounded by many people. They both consider themselves to be strong, independent men who need nothing and no one. However, what we see of them in the beginning of their stories is that they are suffering greatly from this isolation. Their lives aren't fulfilled and content, but desolate and meaningless. They do need a connection to others, but that need is completely *unconscious* or *unknown* and, if it remains so, it will clearly destroy (metaphorically kill) them.

This doesn't mean that the need for *others* is greater or more important than the needs of the *Self*; it just means that these two aspects of who we are are seeking to find a balance within us. For example, in our earlier exploration of *Dead Poets Society* and *Ordinary People*, we saw that the boys in these two stories diminished the value of their own needs out of a sense of obligation and duty to their families and their communities (*others*). This also brought about strife, struggle, and conflict, which if left unresolved (*unconscious, unknown*) would ultimately destroy their emerging sense of *Self* identity. So here the weight of the imbalance was reversed:

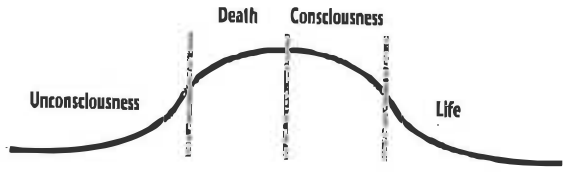
SELF vs. OTHERS

At its core, the structure of a story is framed around the conflict that ensues as a result of this sort of gross imbalance. Remember, **conflict is *always* a matter of imbalance.** Think about how imbalance creates strife, stress, rivalry, dissension, incompatibility, and just about any other expression of conflict that you can imagine. So writers must ask themselves: How does this imbalance apply to my own life and to my stories?

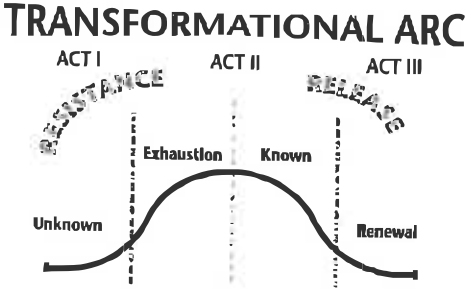
Getting Back in Shape

To get a greater sense of how these opposing tensions are expressed in story structure, we need to reopen the circle and put it back into the

linear wave pattern that forms the arc. This enables us to better track the movement of the protagonist. When we reopen the circle, we will leave the quadrants in place, thus the storyline is now divided into four (relatively) equal parts.



It does seem, however, that the concepts of *life* and *death*, *consciousness* and *unconsciousness*, may be a bit grand and too cumbersome for many types of stories. Therefore, I found it helpful to modify these terms and give them an expression that is easier to work with. *Consciousness* is really just an indication that something is ***known***, and its opposite refers to what is ***unknown***. *Life*, in story language, usually means that something is moving toward a ***renewal*** of energy, and its opposite is a movement away from or an ***exhaustion*** of energy. When these concepts are integrated into the arc, they can tell writers quite a lot about how the protagonist will move through a story.



For example, the protagonist will always enter the story in a condition of great *unknowing*. There must be some aspect of the conflict that he or she doesn't know how to solve or resolve, or there would be no story to tell.

When we first meet Oskar Schindler and Rick Blaine, for instance, they are both living under the cynical delusion (in their respective films) that as long as they get their extravagant share of the spoils of war, they've got everything they need. They are completely oblivious to how empty their lives have become. Throughout the first halves of *Schindler's List* and *Casablanca*, both of these protagonists demonstrate great *resistance* to any effort to make real human contact. However, the greater their resistance to change, in the first half of the arc, the more *exhausted* and non-functioning their old attitudes and behaviors become. In the second half of these films, Oskar and Rick become aware of their emptiness and begin to figure out how to resolve their internal and external conflicts. It is from this new place of *knowing* that they are pushed to fight for a *renewal* of life in the climax. What was unconsciousness (unknown) becomes conscious (known); what was obsolete dies (becomes exhausted and runs out of energy) and has the potential to invigorate (renew) their spirits, bringing both their internal and external conflicts into a new sense of balance.

As Simple As ABC

Setting up conflict at the beginning of a story establishes the plotlines that will guide the story throughout. There are three primary plotlines in a story: a plot and two subplots. It can often feel as if there are more than these three, but, as you will see, all storylines are usually an aspect of either the plot or one of the principal subplots.

In the film industry, **the plot is referred to as the "A" STORY.** Chapter Two covered in great detail how the plot is developed. If you recall:

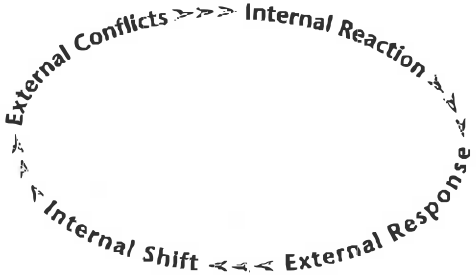
Heightened *CONFLICT* creates *JEOPARDY.*
JEOPARDY* creates a need for *RESOLUTION.
Getting to the *RESOLUTION* establishes a *GOAL.*
The struggle to achieve the *GOAL* generates dramatic *TENSION.*

In Chapter Two we also discussed that a lot more is going on in a script than just the external line of action or plot. If a story is true to our own

human experience, then for every *external* action there is an *internal* reaction. This internal reaction represents the inner drive of the protagonist, and it is what MOTIVATES his or her external actions, creating a *cause and effect* or *symbiotic* relationship between the two.

Here's how it works:

1. Something happens in the *outer*, physical world that creates an ***external conflict,*** which produces a response based on the *inner* needs of the protagonist.
2. Those inner needs cause an ***internal reaction.***
3. This internal reaction stimulates a character to take physical action, eliciting an ***external response.***
4. The external response creates an ***internal shift*** in how the protagonist sees him- or herself and the rest of the world.
5. As a result of this internal shift, the protagonist is capable of resolving the ***external conflict.***



To some degree *all* stories observe this principle of internal reaction to external conflict. Even in the worst films, characters will still have some sort of emotional reaction to the stimulus in their environment. Danger engenders fear, a pretty girl inspires lust, loss evokes sorrow, and so on. But those emotional responses will pretty much dangle around on the edges of a story unless they are made part of the substance of the story itself.

To weave the internal conflict of the character into the fabric of the story it must be given form, weight, and dimension in much the same manner as it is given form and shape in the external conflict. This means that when the INNER CONFLICT rises to a level that is great

enough to demand RESOLUTION, it establishes a GOAL that inspires ACTION. This forms a STRUCTURE that is contained in an internal plotline of its own. **This is the nature of a subplot.**

NOTE: Many theories on writing consider a subplot to be a storyline that is merely secondary or complementary to the plot. Its primary function, therefore, is to complicate or add dimension to the external line of action. While to some degree it is true that a subplot does complicate and add dimension to the story, I find this definition to undervalue the function of subplots, and it likewise gives the writer very little information or understanding of how to design and develop them.

For our purposes, do not think of subplotting as secondary or subordinate to the plot. Here, *sub* does not mean "less than," it means "foundational"—as in *sub*-floor or *sub*-strata. A subplot is the *sub*stantial underpinning of a story that not only motivates the activity but also gives the action its true meaning and value. This bears repeating:

A subplot motivates activity and gives meaning and value to the action of the plot.

As mentioned, there are two primary subplots in a well-developed story. Chapter Five covered at length the development of the fatal flaw of character, which is where the internal conflict is developed. This subplot is called the **"B" STORY.**

The "B" story reveals what the protagonist needs to achieve *internally* in order to help resolve the external goal of the plot. But there's a fundamental problem here: How does a writer "show" internal conflict? In a novel or poem, there can at least be a wordy discourse on what a person is thinking and feeling. But film focuses on our actions, not our thoughts. So the question screenwriters and playwrights must constantly ask themselves is: How do characters express their inner emotions in their external behavior?

In this regard, let's take another look at the film classic *Casablanca*. Few would quarrel with the depiction of movie critic Robert Ebert, who describes Rick Blaine as a "disappointed, wounded, resentful hero," who has a "veneer of neutrality and indifference."[2] But how do we actually *know* this about him? The plot only reveals that Rick's old lover Ilsa shows up one day and asks him to help her and her husband escape Nazi occupation. There's not much justification for brooding and bitterness in that little request. A simple "yes" or "no" would do. But it's not quite that easy because Rick and Ilsa have a past, an unresolved past: *a disappointing, wounding, and resentful past*.... As the story unfolds we learn that Rick, a man for whom love and intimacy have never come easily, once gave his heart completely to Ilsa and the result was that she abandoned him—at least that's how he remembers it. So he covers his pain and heartache with a *veneer of neutrality and indifference*, never intending to let his heart become vulnerable again. Then, one day, "of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world," she walks into his and the ice that surrounds his heart begins to thaw.

In the "A" story (*external conflict*), something very big is at stake: Rick is asked to help Victor Laszlo—one of the leaders of the Allied Resistance—to escape from the malevolent grip of his Nazi pursuers. But because of the "B" story (*internal conflict*), Rick cynically refuses to get involved. Thus, Rick's sense of isolation and apathy puts him in *opposition* to achieving the goal of the plot. This establishes the dramatic tension that needs to be resolved: To help Victor escape the Nazis, Rick must get over the disappointment and resentment of his past in order to care enough to want to help Victor.

What becomes clear is that the "A" story is dependent upon the "B" story for resolution. In other words, if Rick's internal issues don't get resolved, he will not help Victor escape. So the primary concern a writer must wrestle with is: How does Rick resolve his inner conflict?

As a writer, always rely upon what you experience in your own life to answer a question like this. How do you resolve your own inner

conflicts? Can inner transformation ever be a passive act? Does self-determination and willpower alone truly resolve inner torment? It's not that self-determination and willpower aren't effective tools, but they can't be used in a vacuum. Behind all inner commitment to change there must be *actions* that will validate whether or not that change has occurred. This means that *internal change is demonstrated in* ***relationship*** *to something in the outer world.*

A person's inner conflict isn't resolved just because he or she says so. If a marriage is on the rocks because of a husband's infidelity, it can't be fixed simply by an apology and a claim that he'll never do it again. He might be telling the absolute truth at the moment, but only time and consistency in *relationship* to his spouse will demonstrate whether or not anything has really changed within him and within her as well.

RELATIONSHIP, therefore, is another necessary aspect of the transformational arc. **The relationship conflict forms a second primary subplot, called the "C" STORY.** In *Casablanca*, Rick doesn't help Laszlo escape because he awoke one morning and decided it would be a nice thing to do. Rick helps Laszlo escape because he has *a change of heart.* That change occurred in ***relationship*** to how his love for Ilsa transformed him when the conflict between them was resolved. The internal relationship plotline is separate but not detached from the rest of the plotlines. It is one of the essential strands finely woven into the texture of the whole story. This distinct yet supporting quality is what makes the relationship storyline a subplot entity unto itself.

It's important to note that there can be some confusion regarding the relationship subplot, because sometimes a relationship can also define what is driving the plot or the external conflict itself. But these two types of relationship storylines are not the same at all. These are the distinctions:

- In the "A" story, a relationship conflict is driven by *external*

- In the "C" story, a relationship conflict primarily focuses on the protagonist's internal conflict and it serves to internally challenge him or her to change and grow in *relationship* to someone or something.

In other words, the "A" story can be about a couple getting married—which makes the goal of the plot revolve around whether or not they will physically get to the altar. However, the issues that they face internally in order to open their hearts to love and acceptance of each other are aspects of the "C" story.

For example, in *An Affair to Remember*, the plot or "A" story (*external action*) is driven by a love affair between a man and a woman who meet onboard a ship and fall in love and are planning to get married—only not to each other. They each have prior marriage commitments, so the conflict of the plot revolves around whether or not they can overcome these entanglements and other physical obstacles (she becomes disabled at one point) in order to unite and live happily ever after—with each other.

In this example, there is no killer to catch or big game to win in the "A" story. The central question of the whole plot revolves around whether or not Nickie (Cary Grant) and Terry (Deborah Kerr) can overcome other marriage commitments, and even physical handicaps, in order to get together in the end. But in truth, these external problems are not what pose the biggest threat to their union. Both of these people have sold out. In the beginning of the story, we learn that Nickie is set to marry a woman because she's rich and beautiful. Terry is similarly betrothed to a rich man who wants to make her into the ideal wife and society hostess. Furthermore, these marriages of convenience have caused them both to turn their backs on their own artistic endeavors (Nickie is an artist and Terry is a singer).

So, the central question of the "A" **story** (plot) is **will this couple (*physically*) get together?** But, the primary obstacle to their union lies in the "B" story (internal subplot), which shows us through their fatal flaw that **they**

capacity to love). But it's in the "C" **story** (relationship subplot) where the challenge for them to **learn to trust true love** is actually played out. If they can achieve this trust by regaining a belief in themselves again, they will not only resolve the "B" and "C" stories, but this will also cause them to form a union with each other, which resolves the "A" story as well.

If a relationship storyline is part of the plot, it explores the physicality of how a relationship is formed—boy meets girl, boy loses girl, girl lets boy catch her, etc. But, **as a subplot, a relationship storyline examines the internal value that the protagonist needs to acquire in order to succeed at achieving the relationship in the plot.**

Don't confuse a relationship plot with a relationship subplot. Plot-driven relationship stories as seen in *An Affair to Remember* and *When Harry Met Sally* are actually quite rare. Even when the love story feels as though it's the most prominent part of the film, more often than not the plot itself has very little to do with love. In *Sea of Love*, the goal of the plot or "A" story is to catch a serial killer. In *Shakespeare in Love*, the driving conflict of the plot or "A" story is to produce a play. In *The African Queen*, the primary objective is to escape the Germans and blow up one of their ships along the way. As in real life, love isn't usually our primary goal; it tends to be what happens to us while we're doing other things.

Relationship subplots aren't just about romantic love; they can be about the protagonist's need for relationship with *anyone* and anything. The relationship that Oskar Schindler grappled with was between himself and the rest of humanity. In *Amadeus*, Salieri's fight was between his conscience and the divine. In *Moby Dick*, the clash with nature became the metaphorical battleground for the protagonist's struggle to accept and come to value his own nature. In Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, her protagonist, Sethe, wrestles with her own soul in the ghostly form of the daughter she murdered in an act of desperation to keep her "safe" from the hands of slavers.

One final and very important note to keep in mind when you are in the process of defining your plotlines: *Never lose connection with the theme.*

In a strong story it is always the thematic **value** that the protagonist is striving to achieve. Therefore:

1. **The external events in the "A" story represent the opportunity in the *outer world* for the protagonist to grow and evolve toward that thematic value.**
2. **The internal conflict (fatal flaw of character) in the "B" story represents what is *lacking inside* that is forcing the protagonist to grow toward that thematic value.**
3. **The relationship conflict of the "C" story shows the impact that the lack of this value is having on the protagonist's *ability to connect* with someone or something.**

If, for example, we were to say that the theme of *Casablanca* is simply that **we need each other,** then:

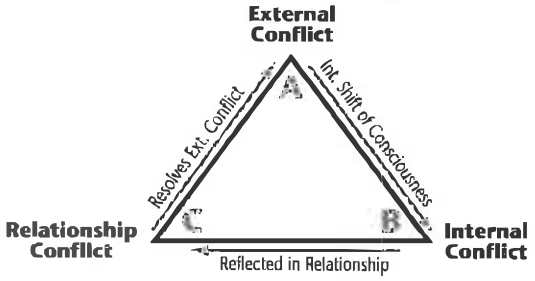
1. The external events in the "A" story must be set up as an opportunity for Rick to be needed. Hence, he is asked to save Victor Laszlo from the Nazis.
2. In the setup of the "B" story, the theme is expressed by showing us what Rick personally lacks in terms of having this need for others. He believes he needs nothing and no one, and his manner is portrayed as surly, brusque, ill-tempered, non-communicative, and impersonal.
3. In the "C" story, Rick's lack of valuing others leaves him isolated and alone, even in a crowd. This chasm between himself and others is widened even further when Ilsa appears on the scene and asks for his help. He not only spurns her because of the way he believes she once rejected him, but seeing her again drives him even further into himself. This makes the goal of the plot—to get Laszlo out of Casablanca—feel even more unattainable.

The Wholly Triad

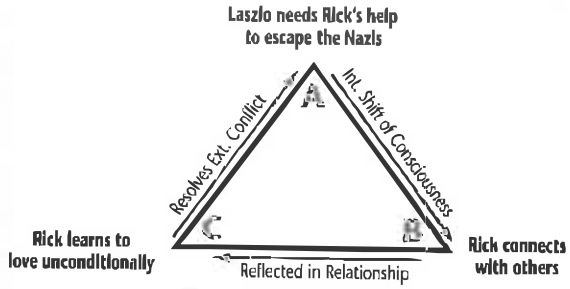
As mentioned, there are many different approaches to understanding plot and subplot. But if a story is to be meaningful, it must express the writer's values and thematic point of view—an agenda that demands collaboration from every aspect of the story. **Plot and subplots, therefore, are interdependent parts of the same whole. They have an individual nature, but they need each other in order to become fully expressed.**

When the "A", "B," and "C" plotlines are clear and well balanced, they tell a powerful and compelling story.

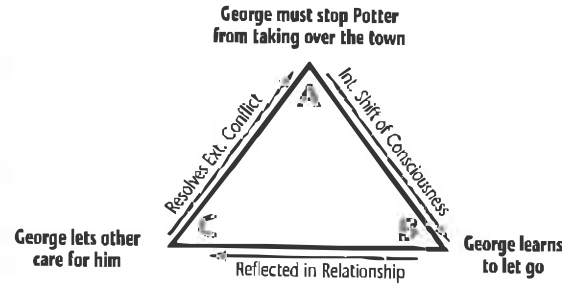
- The "A" story shows us the problem in the *outer* world that can only be solved if:
- There is a shift of consciousness in the protagonist in the "B" story, which represents the *inner* world.
- That shift of consciousness primarily occurs in *relationship* to someone or something in the "C" story.
- And it is then through the relationship that the problem in the "A" story is resolved.



In *Casablanca*, the conflict of the "A" story—**Laszlo needs Rick's help to escape the Nazis**—can only be achieved if the conflict of the "B" story—**Rick connects with others**—is resolved through the conflict of the "C" story—**Rick learns to love unconditionally.** Rick learns to love unconditionally through his reunion with Ilsa in the "C" story, and this change deepens his connection to others, which motivates him to help Laszlo escape.



In *It's a Wonderful Life*, the conflict of the "A" story—**George must stop Potter from taking over the town**—can only be achieved if the conflict of the "B" story—**George learns to let go**—is resolved through the conflict of the "C" story—**George lets others care for him.** When Potter forces things to get so bad in Bedford Falls that George feels the only way out is to let go completely and jump off a bridge, he is rescued by an angel who shows him how important his relationships are with everyone in the town. Through this action George comes to realize that everything he ever really wanted he already has, including friends who will care for him as much as he cares for them. As long as George was holding on so tightly to his belief that he had to take care of everyone and everything, Potter was able to maintain a stranglehold on the town and its inhabitants. When George let go, the townspeople proved that they could uphold their end of the burden as well, and the effect of this union was to force Potter out of commission permanently and to allow George to get on with his life.



As a writer, one of the most effective ways you can begin to self-analyze your script is to ask yourself this simple question: **In order to resolve the external conflict, what will the protagonist achieve internally at the end of the story that he or she is not capable of achieving at the beginning?** If the answer is nothing, or very little, then you can be pretty certain that there isn't much internal subplotting going on. This means that your protagonist has come equipped in the beginning of the conflict with everything he or she needs to fight the final battle in the climax. And if this is true, then it doesn't really matter how much action and activity takes place; not much of a journey has occurred. In effect, the story doesn't really "go" anywhere.

A film I found disappointing for just this reason was Roman Polanski's *The Pianist*. According to his Director's Notes, Polanski was attracted to this autobiographical material about the holocaust because its author, Wladyslaw Szpilman, portrayed his own experience during this period with "surprising objectivity, which is almost cool and scientific."[3] While it may be a powerful and even compelling character trait for a protagonist to suffer through this sort of horror and misery with emotional detachment, the story itself cannot be told from that perspective or it will leave the audience detached as well. This is not to say that images of Nazi violence and inhumanity in this film aren't deeply disturbing, but they alone aren't enough to connect us to the emotional depth of the protagonist.

The plotline, or "A" story, in *The Pianist*, tracks Szpilman's survival during World War II. With the help of friends and courageous strangers, Szpilman is hidden away in various apartment rooms throughout Warsaw for the duration of the war. During most of the film, the audience watches Szpilman as he looks out his apartment windows and watches the Nazis slaughter nearly every Jew in the ghetto. There is no real development of any internal issue that impacts his ability to survive, so there is no fatal flaw, or "B" story, in this film. Further, even though we see people for whom Szpilman demonstrates great feeling and caring, there is no substantial relationship conflict that Szpilman needs to resolve in order to cope with or gain inner strength from his experiences. Therefore, there is also no "C" story. In the end, the Nazis are defeated and Szpilman becomes free to resume his illustrious concert career. This is something he was quite capable of doing (internally) since the film began. So, for all the horror Szpilman witnessed, there isn't much in the way this story is told that shows that he became any greater or lesser for his experiences. Again, this doesn't imply that in real life Szpilman was not profoundly changed by the hardships he had to endure, but the film never takes us into that internal reality.

[3] *The Pianist*. Roman Polanski. Director's notes. http://www.thepianist-themovie.com/pianist.htm

Today one of the most popular genres in which there is a prevalent and glaring lack of a strong "B" and "C" subplot is the romantic comedy. Because the internal arc of character and the relationship conflict give meaning and value to a story, a romantic tale told without conscious attention to these plotlines will convey almost no thematic information about what it means to love. If we return to the example of *My Best Friend's Wedding*, discussed in Chapter Five, what we see at the end of the film is that Jules "surrenders" the man she *doesn't* love to the woman who already has his heart. Not only does this tell us absolutely nothing about the nature of love, but, if you think about it, it doesn't even make sense. How can you surrender something you don't have to somebody who already has it?

In an early draft of a script, a writer may be inspired by complex plot contrivances that produce surprising twists, unpredictable turns, funny situations, and intriguing dilemmas. While it's extremely important for all of these avenues to be fully explored, it's also a very dangerous trap for a writer to believe that cleverness and complexity alone will ultimately substitute for value and meaning. As the writing process evolves, it is important to identify what impact all the action, mystery, suspense, humor, and romance will actually have upon the lives of your characters. This is not something you want to wait to summarize in the end; rather, it is essential that you develop it at the beginning of the story in the form of emotions such as pain, emptiness, sadness, desire, and need.

If you succeed at establishing this emotional content, there is a very strong possibility that you will have succeeded at establishing or setting up the internal conflict in the story as well.

Case Studies

1) *Romancing the Stone*

I especially like using *Romancing the Stone* as an example because the structure is so solid and straightforward. Straightforward, however, doesn't mean formulaic or unimaginative. This film is a wonderful model of how inner character development can turn something simple and nearly clichéd into a meaningful and memorable story.

In Chapter Four we explored how the theme of *Romancing the Stone* was developed around the metaphor that *love is an adventure.* Adventure, if you recall, has a dual nature; while it can lead us toward something that is thrilling and remarkable, it also takes us into unknown territory that feels dangerous and unpredictable. Finding the courage to trust the adventure, therefore, is the essential requirement of the intrepid soul who is searching for love. This thematic information now becomes very useful in order to **non-randomly** set up the three primary storylines in this film. Let's take a look at the thematic breakdown we constructed in the last chapter to see how it helps define the "A," "B," and "C" storylines.

The theme of this film offers a lot of information for designing the plot. If the film is going to express the value that Joan must learn to ***trust the adventure of love***, then the only way she is going to come to appreciate this value is if she *experiences* a real adventure for herself. Because a real adventure will include real danger and peril, the stakes can be very high and not easily attained. This also indicates that the antagonists will represent the dark side of the adventure—and must truly be dangerous. Therefore, designing a plot that makes the antagonists kidnappers who threaten the life of Joan's sister is an excellent setup for the plot of this storyline.

"A" STORY (PLOT)	JOAN MUST SAVE HER SISTER FROM RUTHLESS KIDNAPPERS

On the right side of the illustration of the thematic structure, you can see that Joan's goal in the subplot is to learn to follow her heart. This very directly defines what she must achieve in the "C" story (relationship subplot). But if this goal is going to be a challenge for her, **then it must be something that she is not capable of achieving when the story begins.** Indeed, Joan's fatal flaw is that she is a coward when it comes to facing the unknown and trusting in the adventure that leads to love.

THEMATIC STRUCTURE

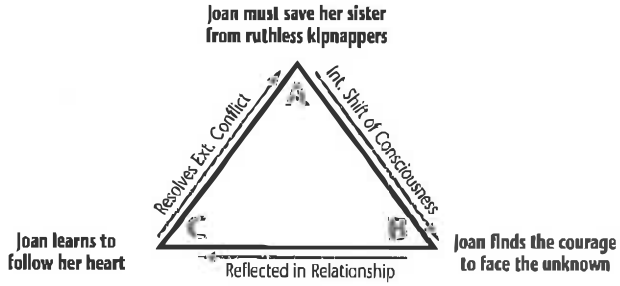
SUBJECT
Love

THEMATIC POINT OF VIEW
Love is an adventure

PLOT ("A")	SUBPLOT ("B" & "C")
(external thematic goal)	(internal thematic goal)
Trust the adventure	***Follow your heart***
OBSTACLE	FATAL FLAW
Fear the adventure	***Hide from your heart***
CONTEXT	CHARACTER TRAITS
Dangerous	***Isolated***
Scary	***Lonely***
Unpredictable	***Idealizes love***

"B" STORY (INTERNAL SUBPLOT)	JOAN FINDS THE COURAGE TO FACE THE UNKNOWN
"C" STORY (RELATIONSHIP SUBPLOT)	JOAN LEARNS TO FOLLOW HER HEART

It's important to test your "A," "B," and "C" plotlines to see if they support each other in making the story whole. In *Romancing the Stone*, Joan will be able to save her sister from the ruthless kidnappers *only* if she finds the courage to face the adventure of the unknown. Joan can only acquire this courage by learning to follow her heart, which will also help her save her sister. And, of course, the by-product of learning to follow her heart is that it will lead Joan to love.



2) *Lethal Weapon*

The original *Lethal Weapon* works as well as it does primarily because it has such a strong character arc. Both co-protagonists must grow and evolve if they are going to solve the goal of the plot:

"A" STORY	RIGGS AND MURTAUGH MUST STOP
(PLOT)	THE DANGEROUS DRUG CARTEL

But unlike most of the heroes in modern action films, Riggs and Murtaugh **do not** come fully equipped to stop the dangerous drug cartel when the story begins. Even though they are up to the task in terms of being brave, smart, and tough, they are also both set on a course of self-destruction. If nothing changes, it's unlikely either of them will live long enough to defeat the enemy.

Both men are vulnerable because they have abandoned their trust in the life process: *Riggs has lost too much*, and *Murtaugh has too much to lose*. The thematic breakdown illustrates that as a result of this distrust,

Riggs is intent on throwing his life away and Murtaugh is holding on to his life too tightly. To bring both of their lives back into *balance*, they must **learn to trust life.** But trust is not an ideal that can be achieved by mere contemplation. It is achieved through effort in ***relationship*** to something or someone that challenges the very thing that is feared. In this story, the biggest source of distrust for both men is each other. Riggs believes that Murtaugh is dangerous because he's too timid for a cop, and Murtaugh is afraid to be anywhere near Riggs because he's too reckless. In reality, they are both right. But they're stuck with each other and in order to solve the goal of the plot they have to unite as a team, which means **learning to trust each other.**

THEMATIC STRUCTURE

SUBJECT

Life and death

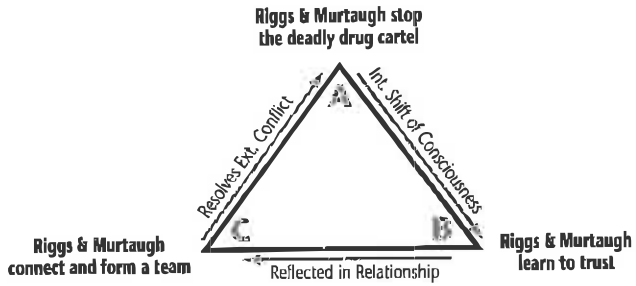
THEMATIC POINT OF VIEW

Choose life

PLOT ("A")	SUBPLOT ("B" & "C")
(external thematic goal)	(internal thematic goal)
Value life	***To connect with others***
OBSTACLE	FATAL FLAW
Devalue life	***Disconnected from others (Riggs)***
	Too attached to others (Murtaugh)
CONTEXT	CHARACTER TRAITS
Murder	RIGGS: ***Lonely***
Corruption	***Reckless***
Desperation	***Suicidal***
Savagery	MURTAUGH: ***Overly attached***
	Controlling
	Accident-prone

"B" STORY	RIGGS AND MURTAUGH
(INTERNAL SUBPLOT)	LEARN TO TRUST LIFE
"C" STORY	RIGGS AND MURTAUGH MUST
(RELATIONSHIP SUBPLOT)	CONNECT AND FORM A TEAM

Notice how well the plotline and subplotlines triangulate to support one another in this story. Riggs and Murtaugh will **stop the deadly drug cartel** *only* if they **learn to trust life again** and stop being too reckless or too timid. They achieve these goals by learning to **trust and connect with each other,** and thereby gain the support they need to change. Ultimately, it is through the strength of their teamwork that they stop the cartel and resolve the goal of the plot.



3) *Ordinary People*

Anyone who is writing a character-driven story would be well advised to review *Ordinary People* and observe how strong the external plotline is. There's a tendency in character-driven films to emphasize what people are thinking and feeling, not what they're doing. Thoughts and feelings are not only difficult to communicate in a film, but they also don't convey the full scope of how we humans deal with our inner issues. Just as external actions cause internal reactions, it can also be said that our internal reality is always based on external circumstances. We don't get depressed, agitated, afraid, worried, or even joyful and ecstatic for no reason. There is a cause-and-effect relationship between external stimuli and an internal response.

For the family in *Ordinary People,* there is nothing they would like more than to keep a tight lid on their emotions. Therefore, in order for their thoughts and feelings to become big enough that they can actually be seen and understood, something quite significant has to *happen* to them. In fact, even when something as bad as the death of their firstborn son occurs, they have such powerful coping mechanisms in place that most of the pain and heartbreak they feel is suppressed. Therefore, if a writer wants to expose their feelings and emotions, the family will have to be pushed, by external events, past the breaking point—and this is precisely where this movie begins.

THEMATIC STRUCTURE

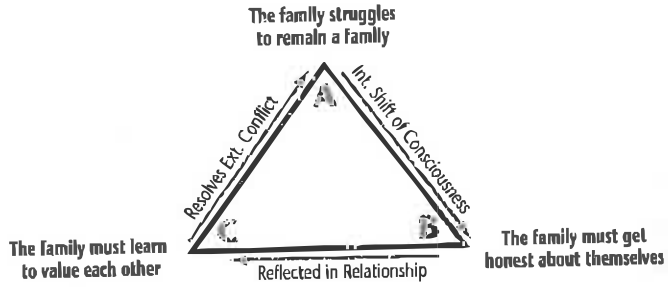
SUBJECT

Family

THEMATIC POINT OF VIEW

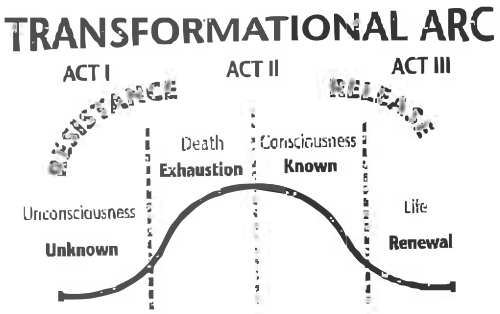
A family must value each other

PLOT ("A")	SUBPLOT ("B" & "C")
(external thematic goal)	(internal thematic goal)
Value the needs of the individual	***Value your own needs***
OBSTACLE	FATAL FLAW
Devalue the needs of the individual	***Devalue your own needs***
CONTEXT	CHARACTER TRAITS
Demands conformity	***Inauthentic and controlling (Mom)***
Inauthentic	***Self-doubting and anxious (Dad)***
Desperate	***Depressed and suicidal (Conrad)***



Putting It All Together

The *organic* structure of a story is beginning to take shape. The quad- rants express a natural form of dramatic tension that delineates th- story into what we commonly refer to as the THREE-ACT STRUC- TURE. But, how do four quadrants equal three acts?



Notice in the diagram that the second act is divided into two halves thus it is (relatively) twice as long as the first and third acts. In fact, it ma- be for just this reason that some experts in this field use a four-act mode- when defining screenplay structure. However, it really doesn't matter wha- you call it. It's more important that you *feel* the tension of these opposin- quadrants as they pull against each other, for it is they, not some arbitrar- act break or page count, that will define the movement of a story.

On the other hand, act breaks and page counts are extremely relevan- in terms of giving the writer guideposts and boundaries within which t- organize and make maximum use of structural elements. In the upcomin- chapters we'll examine these elements as they are traditionally define-

within the context of the *Three-Act Structure*, but we'll also explore them for their deeper human values.

The transformational arc is not just the arc of any one character; it is the arc of the *human* character. This means that *all* movement within a story must be a mirror of our own movement in life. How we rise to a challenge by making choices and accepting change ("A" story), how we are capable of self-destruction and re-creation ("B" story), and how we relate to each other ("C" story) are what bring storytelling to life.