2

Three-Act Structure

I smacked my little boy. My anger was powerful. Like justice. Then I discovered no feeling in the hand. I said, 'Listen, I want to explain the complexities to you.' I spoke with seriousness and care, particularly of fathers. He asked, when I finished, if I wanted him to forgive me. I said yes. He said no. Like trumps.

'The Hand' is a chapter in a short story, 'Eating Out,' by the American miniaturist Leonard Michaels; it's also in effect a complete story in itself. If all stories contain the same structural elements, then it should be relatively easy to identify within 'The Hand' the building blocks with which we should now be familiar.

Protagonist – the narrator
Antagonist – his son
Inciting incident – awareness of no feeling in hand
Desire – to explain his action
Crisis – 'He asked . . . if I wanted him to forgive me'
Climax – 'I said yes. He said no'
Resolution – 'Like trumps'.

'The Hand' is, of course, not drama, but nonetheless it contains our building blocks, but how are they assembled? In what order? By what rules? And if there are rules, why do they exist?

What is Structure?

When Alan Plater first began writing for television, he asked his agent, the legendary Peggy Ramsay; exactly what 'this structure thing' was. She replied: 'Oh darling, it's just two or three little surprises followed every now and again by a bigger surprise.'[1] Superficially glib, it's actually a brilliantly pithy analysis – pinning down firmly the essential structural ingredient of drama: the act.

Acts are a unit of action bound by a character's desire. They have their own beginning, middle and end, the latter of which spins the narrative off in a new and unexpected direction; this of course being 'the surprise' Ramsay prescribed. It's something the Greeks called *peripeteia*, a word most commonly translated as 'reversal'.

In simple terms, a character is pursuing a specific goal when something unexpected happens to change the nature and direction of their quest. While minor reversals can occur in every scene, bigger ones tend to divide the work into specific acts. On returning from a visit to his friend Obi-Wan Kenobi, Luke Skywalker finds his step-parents have been murdered – that's a reversal. Seeking vengeance, Luke now has a new quest and a new act to perform it in.

One-act plays can be traced back as far as Euripides' *Cyclops*; sitcoms tend to be told in two (*Seinfeld* displayed a complete mastery of the two-act form[2]), but when the duration of a work reaches an hour or more – certainly in television – it's rare to see less than three. Partly this is to do with the need for commercial breaks, but it also ensures there are regular gripping hooks or turning points whether there are adverts or not. It's important to remember that there is no limit to the number of acts a story can have – *Raiders of the Lost Ark* has seven – but the central archetype that governs modern screenwriting, and on which so much of storytelling is built, is three.

The Three-Act Form

Three-act structure is the cornerstone of drama primarily because it embodies not just the simplest units of Aristotelian[3] (and indeed all) structure; it follows the irrefutable laws of physics. Everything must have a beginning, middle and end. The American screenwriting teacher Syd Field first articulated the three-act paradigm, breaking act structure down to these constituent parts: set-up, confrontation and resolution, with a turning point towards the end of the first (the inciting incident) and second (the crisis) acts.

ACT ONE	ACT TWO	ACT THREE
turning point	turning point	

It's a model that lies behind all modern mainstream film and TV narratives. Contrary to the perception of many, though, it wasn't invented by Field. One only has to read Rider Haggard's novel *King Solomon's Mines*, written in 1885 and so clearly an antecedent of *Indiana Jones*, to see the structural prototype of the modern movie form.

The articulation of this structure began with the world's very first screenwriting manual: *The Technique of the Photoplay* by Epes Winthrop Sargent, a valuable and still entertaining book written during the gold-rush period of the silent movie industry in 1912. Sargent, should he have wanted it, has some claim to the title of first film 'guru'. He doesn't specifically mention act structure, but every example of story he gives ('The story must not only have a start, but an object point [and] end or climax') contains it in embryo form.

In his history of American screenwriting, *What Happens Next?*, Marc Norman charts the development of this 'growing dependence on an archetypal narrative pattern, introduced into film by [Edwin]

Porter and [D. W.] Griffith but preceding them, arcing back to the Greeks.'

The classic movie narrative was structurally simple but capable of countless variations, applicable to drama or comedy . . . a protagonist is introduced with a goal, a desire with which the audience can easily sympathize, and then an antagonist is introduced, as an individual or a representative of an opposing force, standing in his or her way. The movie becomes their conflict, and its sequences become the more or less linear escalation of that struggle, the cowboy with the gunfighter, the lovers with parents opposing, as predictable as much of classical music . . . This seamless conflict built to a third-act confrontation – the climax – and ended with a resolution that fit the mode, death in a tragedy and marriage, most typically, in a comedy.[4]

But why do we have to tell stories in three acts? When Charlie Kaufman says of the three-act form, 'it doesn't really interest me', he's implying it's a lazy, conventional and conservative form. Yet all his films embody it.* The same tropes of a flawed individual cast off into an alien world to find themselves irrevocably changed are as standard in his work as they are in that of Richard Curtis. Why can he not help but practise what he condemns? The endless recurrence of the same underlying pattern suggests psychological, if not biological and physical reasons for the way we tell stories. If we don't *choose* to tell them that way, perhaps we are compelled to.

In simplistic terms, human beings order the world dialectically. Incapable of perceiving randomness, we insist on imposing order on any observed phenomena, any new information that comes our way. We exist; we observe new stimuli; and both are altered in the process. It's thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Students encounter something of which they're unaware, explore and assimilate it, and by merging it with their pre-existing knowledge, grow. Every act of

* For a full analysis of *Being John Malkovich*, see Appendix III.

perception is an attempt to impose order, to make sense of a chaotic universe. Storytelling, at one level, is a manifestation of this process. As David Mamet says: 'Dramatic structure is not an arbitrary – or even a conscious – invention. It is an organic codification of the human mechanism for ordering information. Event, elaboration, denouement; thesis, antithesis, synthesis; boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl; act one, act two, act three.'[5]

If you strip the three-act structure down you can see this inevitable and inescapable shape at work:

Act One: Thesis
Act Two: Antithesis
Act Three: Synthesis.

The 'Hollywood' archetype, then, is dialectics in its most simplified form.[6] Take a flawed character; and at the end of the first act plunge them into an alien world, let them assimilate the rules of that world, and finally, in the third act, test them to see what they have learned. Or, in simple terms:

Act One: Establish a flawed character
Act Two: Confront them with their opposite
Act Three: Synthesize the two to achieve balance.

You can see the same pattern endlessly recurring. All stories involve characters being thrown into an alien world – a place that represents everything outside their previous existence. In *Beowulf*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Heart of Darkness*, the flawed protagonists are confronted with an unrecognizable universe, one that embodies all the characteristics they themselves lack. Here, in this forest, they must find themselves anew. It's a pattern that's most readily visible in film: in *Cars* the selfish, brash, speed jockey Lightning McQueen is thrown into a 1950s backwater; in *Jaws*, Chief Brody's sleepy Amity life is torn apart by threat, fear and moral panic; and in both book and screen adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited*, suburban self-loathing Charles Ryder finds himself in a world of unimagined luxury and confidence. If one accepts this notion of entering a new world (find-

ing oneself in the head of John Malkovich would be a particularly good example), then the story archetype and its ingredients all slip neatly into focus.

The 'surprises' that Peggy Ramsay talked about are more commonly referred to as 'subversions of expectation' – a sudden twist both surprising yet plausible which throws the story in a new direction. Tending to occur towards the end of every act (as in the attempted rape and shooting in *Thelma & Louise* or the explosion in *The Long Good Friday*), they are even more pronounced in films built around twists such as *The Disappearance of Alice Creed* or *The Sixth Sense*. It's easy to dismiss such fireworks as gimmicks, yet these subversions of expectations are nothing of the sort – they're profoundly important structural devices that underlie all storytelling, for they are the portal that invites a protagonist into their new world. A subversion is not a modern invention but *peripeteia* itself, it is the tool that catapults the hero into the opposite of their present state – from thesis to antithesis, from home to a world unknown.
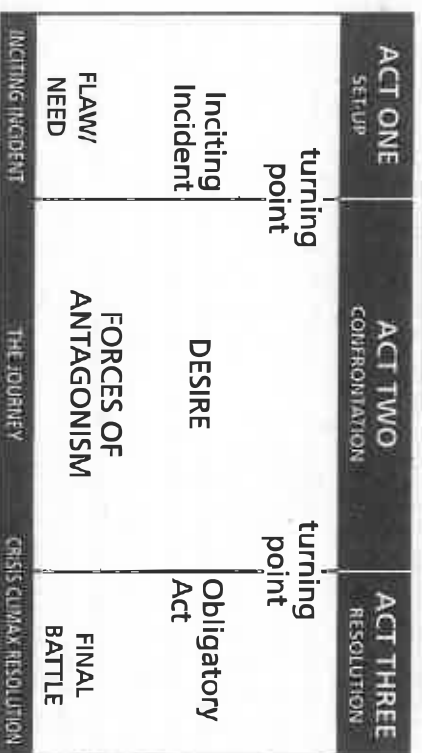
'That's what inciting incidents are too – they are 'explosions of opposition', structural tools freighted with all the characteristics the characters lack; embodiments, indeed, of everything they need. Cliffhangers, inciting incidents and crisis points are essentially the same thing: a turning point at the end of an act; the unexpected entry point for the protagonists into a new world; bombs built from the very qualities they lack which explode their existing universe, hurling them into an alien space of which they must then make sense.

Storytelling, then, can be seen as a codification of the method by which we learn – expressed in a three-act shape. The dialectic pattern – thesis/antithesis/synthesis – is at the heart of the way we perceive the world; and it's a really useful way to look at structure. A character is flawed, an inciting incident throws them into a world that represents everything they are not, and in the darkness of that forest, old and new integrate to achieve a balance. We cannot accept chaos; we *have* to order it. If a story involves the invasion of chaos

and its restoration to order (and all archetypal ones do), then it cannot help but take the form of the three-act shape.

In Bernhard Schlink's novel *The Reader* (and in David Hare's subsequent film), those three stages can be seen exceptionally clearly; indeed, the work is divided into three parts. In part one, fifteen-year-old Michael falls in love with Hanna, an older woman, who one day disappears. Seven years pass until part two. Michael has become a law student and, observing a war crimes trial, he finds the woman he loved in the dock, accused of war crimes committed while a guard at Auschwitz. Hanna is found guilty of the mass murder of 300 Jewish women, and in part three Michael attempts to reconcile the woman he loved with the monster presented to the world. Finally, through understanding of, in this case, her illiteracy, he reaches some kind of accommodation with 'truth'. Three parts (and later three acts) enact love, hate and understanding; thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

ACT ONE SET-UP	ACT TWO CONFRONTATION	ACT THREE RESOLUTION
Inciting Incident → turning point	DESIRE · FORCES OF ANTAGONISM → turning point	Obligatory Act · FINAL BATTLE
FLAW/ NEED		
INCITING INCIDENT	THE JOURNEY	CRISIS CLIMAX RESOLUTION

In the first act of any story a character is presented with a particular flaw or need. An inciting incident occurs towards, or at, the end of that first act, and the protagonist 'falls down a rabbit hole'. In the second act, the character attempts to return to the world from which they came, whilst slowly learning that another equally

important world awaits them where valuable lessons may be learned. At the end of this section, at their lowest ebb, the protagonist must choose whether to confront the enemies ranged against them by calling on lessons they have learned, or to return, sheepishly, to their old self. It's at this crisis point that they almost always choose to engage in the biggest battle (or climax) of their life, to test and then assimilate their new skills, before being finally rewarded (the resolution) for their travails. It's there in David Hare's films *Wetherby* and *Licking Hitler*; it's there in Charlie Kaufman's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*; and it's there in 'The Hand', when the omnipotent narrator is thrown into a world of guilt and shame. All these stories contain the same DNA: a hero meets their opposite, assimilates it and is changed.

But if the three-act form allows us to access the root structure of storytelling, why does so much of theatre prior to the twentieth century (particularly Shakespeare) use five acts? It's tempting to see the five-act form as an historical idiosyncrasy, but by exploring how it evolved, the reasons for its longevity and its underlying structural traits, we shall find that it reveals itself as something far more important than that – and in so doing provides a vital clue as to how all narrative really works.

3

Five-Act Structure

Some time towards the end of the first century BC the Roman lyric poet Horace laid out the principles of act structure in his treatise *Ars Poetica*. In doing so he defined a model that would profoundly influence the dramas of Seneca the Younger, and then, thanks to its later rediscovery, the future course of drama. 'Let no play', he proclaimed, 'be either shorter or longer than five acts, if when once seen it hopes to be called for and brought back to the stage.'[1]

In 2007 the journalist Rafael Behr published in the *Guardian* his satirical version of the then very-much-in-vogue 'Yummy Mummy Lit':[2]

CHAPTER ONE: I woke up to the sound of a baby vomiting. My husband, who shows no interest in having sex with me any more, is pretending to be asleep. Didn't I used to have an exciting career in media and be fancied by men? Where did it all go wrong? (Except for my children, of course. I love them.)

CHAPTER TWO: I went on the school run and was intimidated by a woman in a 4x4 with expensive shoes. My bossy mother-in-law came round and made me feel inadequate. I accidentally sent a text message to Man I Have A Crush On (MIHACO).

CHAPTER THREE: MIHACO texted back. I am thrilled. Does this make me an adulterer? I think it is OK because my husband has gone off me. I think it is OK if I say 'post-feminist' a lot.

CHAPTER FOUR: I snogged/slept with/very nearly slept with MIHACO. It was great. But I feel guilty. I love my husband and my kids. Meanwhile I have come to appreciate that there is more to my mother-in-law than I thought. My dad is my hero, by the way.

CHAPTER FIVE: I went to a party with everyone I know. It was very dramatic. My adultery dilemma reached crisis point. I had to choose between an imperfect real life and a delusional fantasy. I realized MIHACO is an arse so chose my current family. My husband, who I thought was boring but turns out to be reassuringly stable, forgave my infidelity. He is my new hero. Although he will never replace my dad.

Two thousand years after Horace's proclamation, Behr's parody marks a staging post in a long journey. His pastiche unknowingly follows – to an uncanny degree – the five-act pattern practised by Terence, articulated by Horace, assimilated via Ben Jonson and practised by Shakespeare himself, a writer of such profound influence he affects so much of what we write, what we read and what we say:

Three-Act and Five-Act Structure

It's important to underline that a five-act structure isn't really different to a three-act structure, merely a detailed refinement of it, and historically of course both forms can be traced back to the ancients. How does it work? Polanski's film of *Macbeth* has a classic three-act shape, but it carries within it Shakespeare's five (see diagram overleaf).

Simply put, five acts are generated by inserting two further act breaks in the second act of the traditional 'Hollywood' paradigm. The first and last acts remain identical in both forms.

But how does that help us understand stories? In his monumental

		SHAKESPEARE	POLANSKI
Inciting Incident	Witches' prophecy/Decision to murder Duncan	Act One	Act One
	Macbeth becomes king	Act Two	
	Banquo murdered/ Fleance escapes/ Macduff defects	Act Three	Act Two
Crisis	Lady M goes mad/ Macbeth abandoned (worst point)	Act Four	
Climax	Final Battle	Act Five	Act Three
Resolution	Macbeth killed		

study of Shakespearean act structure,[3] the American scholar Thomas Baldwin traced the first use of five acts back to Terence (190–159 BC), noting[4] that all his plays shared a similar underlying shape:

The first act relates the necessary preparatory information leading up to the resolution or resolutions of the characters which occasion the impending struggle . . . The second act presents the preliminary moves and countermoves preceding the main battle. In the third act, the forces opposing the young men make their chief assault, and seem to have the victory. In the fourth act the General for the young men marshals his forces in defence or counterattack; and at the end of the act the opposition has really lost, but the young men have not yet officially won. In the fifth act, they win.

If one overlaid our 'Yummy Mummy' story, Behr's chapters would fit almost exactly. Is that a coincidence, or the suggestion of a deeper connection? Baldwin said of Terence:

[His plays have] been constructed in five, clear-cut, fully and completely demarcated stages. Terence must have been conscious of them and must purposely so have distinguished them. The carefully and closely balanced structure cannot mean anything else . . . Whether Terence himself did or did not mark these five stages as acts, he certainly did construct his plays in these five clearly marked units.[5]

The resurgence of classical ideas during the Renaissance inevitably led to a major revival of this long-forgotten form. The template Terence established became the standard for French and Elizabethan playwrights as they mined the classics for ideas. Seneca, whose plays all consisted of five parts (each separated by a chorus[6]), was a particularly strong influence, and Ben Jonson, widely perceived to be the first playwright to popularize the structure in England, not only fully embraced the form in his own work but produced the first English translation of Ars Poetica by a major poet, opening up Horace's structural musings to a new, hungry and literate generation.

Was Shakespeare aware of the five-act form? As Terence and Horace were part of his grammar-school curriculum, then almost certainly, in addition to which, by the mid sixteenth century it was becoming an ever more popular mode of presentation. Did he practise it? There are considerable (and very entertaining) academic arguments as to whether later editors imposed the structure,[7] though by the time the King's Men occupied the Blackfriars Theatre in 1608 the simple technical demands of trimming candles (each candle lasting the duration of an act) had certainly led to its imposition. The question is to all intents and purposes an irrelevance; what is significant is that the pattern first found in Terence fits the work of Shakespeare to a striking degree. Even if Shakespeare

either refuted or knew nothing of act structure, his work naturally assumes the shape common to both Terence and Jonson. And if that is so, it underlines the idea further that storytelling has a naturally occurring pattern.

But what exactly is the shape and how does it work? To answer this, we must once again journey back to the past.

Freytag's Pyramid

The first person to properly codify Terence's pattern – as it appeared in Elizabethan drama – was the German novelist Gustav Freytag. In 1863, in his epic *Technique of the Drama*, he gave the world 'Freytag's Pyramid'. Taking a long hard look at form, he detected an underlying shape:

EXPOSITION 1 — **COMPLICATIONS** 2 — **CLIMAX** 3 — **FALLING ACTION** 4 — **CATASTROPHE** 5
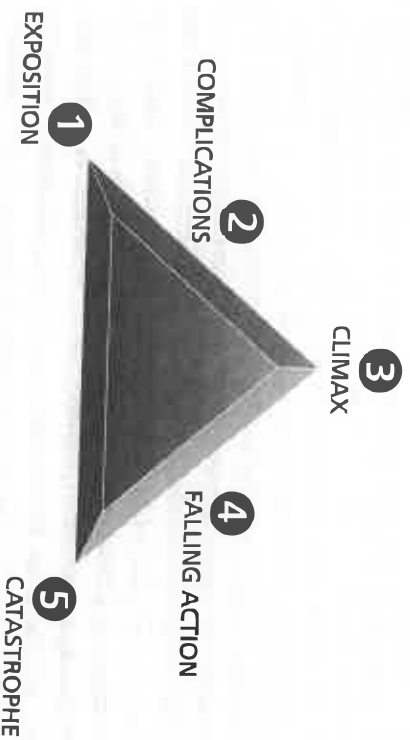
There were five stages in every tragedy, he declared:[a]

1. EXPOSITION. We meet the *dramatis personae*, and time and place are established. We learn about the antecedents of the story. Attention is directed toward the germ of conflict and dramatic tensions.

2. COMPLICATIONS. The course of the action becomes more complicated, the 'tying of the knots' takes place. Interests clash, intrigues are spawned, and events accelerate in a definite direction. Tension mounts, and momentum builds up.

3. THE CLIMAX OF THE ACTION. The development of conflict reaches its high point, the Hero stands at the crossroads, leading to victory or defeat, crashing or soaring.

4. FALLING ACTION. Reversals. The consequences of Act 3 play out, momentum slows, and tension is heightened by false hopes/fears. If it's a tragedy, it looks like the hero can be saved. If [it's not], then it looks like all may be lost.

5. CATASTROPHE. The conflict is resolved, whether through a catastrophe, the downfall of the hero, or through his victory and transfiguration.

At first Freytag's act definitions can appear confusing. Intuitively one feels the climax (the apex of the ladder) should really be in part five not part three. But Freytag is right. For the first time he articulates something deeply significant — the moment most commonly now referred to in structural study as the 'midpoint'.

The Midpoint

What does Banquo's murder in *Macbeth* have in common with the laser torture in *Goldfinger* or the sex on the piano in *Pretty Woman*? Banquo dies in Act III, scene 3. It's the heart of the play, bang in the middle, and, just as in the torture of Bond or the seduction of Vivian Ward, it marks a massive escalation in jeopardy.

Occurring almost exactly halfway through any successful story, the midpoint is the moment something profoundly significant occurs. In *Titanic* the ship hits the iceberg; in *Fatal Attraction* Dan

learns his mistress is pregnant; and in *Alien* the eponymous creature bursts out of Kane's unsuspecting stomach.

Shakespeare's work fits the archetype precisely. Halfway through *Hamlet* the prince becomes certain of Claudius's guilt; in *King Lear* the hero learns his true state in the storm on the heath. It's here that Richard II discovers Bolingbroke has usurped his kingdom ('let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings') and in *Othello* it's the moment the Moor swallows Iago's bait. Mark Antony turns the crowd into a mob exactly halfway through *Julius Caesar*,[9] just as Leontes learns the judgement of the Oracle of Delphi in *The Winter's Tale*. *Macbeth* too is absolutely archetypal: when Banquo is murdered and his son Fleance escapes, Macbeth is fully aware that something profound has changed. Shakespeare even spells it out:

> I am in blood
> Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,
> Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

It's Act III, scene 4, and for Macbeth – for all of them – there can be no return to how life was before.

So why do Thelma and Louise swap characters straight after experiencing sex with their loved ones? Why does Jason Bourne learn the truth about his predicament halfway through *The Bourne Ultimatum*? Why are midpoints so important in producing an emotionally satisfying story shape?[10] Do writers who are entirely unaware of story theory write them subconsciously? What is it that tells them an action of life-changing significance should occur halfway through their work?

Christopher Booker, in his encyclopaedic exploration of storytelling, *The Seven Basic Plots*,[11] argued that all stories could be broken down into five distinct sections. In my own – very brief – summary:

Call to Arms
Dream Stage
Frustration Stage

Nightmare Stage
Thrilling escape from death and resolution.

He is saying, in effect (I have paraphrased below), that these five stages follow a simple pattern – exactly the same one we first saw in Terence:

1. Set up and call to action
2. Things go well, initial objective achieved
3. Things start to go wrong as forces of antagonism gather strength
4. Things go really badly wrong, precipitating crisis
5. Crisis and climax. Final battle with antagonist. Matters resolve for good or ill.

So what happens if you apply each stage to an act? It *does* feel absurdly reductive, but as a simple catch-all synopsis Booker's pattern fits Shakespeare's act form incredibly well – be it *Macbeth*.[12]

1. Witches' prophecy and decision to murder Duncan
2. Macbeth becomes king
3. Macduff defects
4. Lady M goes mad, Macbeth abandoned. (worst point)
5. Final battle. Macbeth killed

or *Romeo and Juliet*:

1. Romeo and Juliet meet
2. Romeo and Juliet marry in secret
3. Juliet discovers she's to be married to Paris as Romeo is banished for killing Tybalt. She pretends to agree, but resolves to kill herself
4. Friar tells Juliet to give consent to marriage and gets her to take a potion faking death. Romeo hears of her demise and misses her explanatory letter by seconds (worst point)
5. Romeo rushes to tomb and kills himself. Juliet awakens, sees her lover dead, then kills herself too.

From Horace to Shakespeare and Jonson, Scribe to Molière and Racine, each stage fits snugly into this form. Take any James Bond film, the *Alien* movies, Pixar's films – indeed, any successful movie or TV drama – and you'll see the same thing: the shape that Terence adopted and Horace articulated imposing itself on the work.[13]

Hollywood movies aren't traditionally thought of as five-act pieces, so it's striking just how beautifully films built on a three-act template fit the five-act form.[14] Five acts help to illuminate not only how the second act in three-act dramas actually works, but in the process highlight the nature of dramatic structure itself. The midpoint shows us, in combination with the second and fourth act breaks, a very clear shape.

While Booker saw that shape, he failed to notice the underlying detail. In the third act, things don't go wrong immediately and continuously.[15] Rather, action peaks in the middle of the act before fortunes reverse in the second half. If we plot a graph of how turning points reflect the characters' fortunes in each act, not only is the apex of the graph – the midpoint – revealed as an extremely important moment in the drama, it's also possible to see a very clear illustration of a familiar verbal trope, the 'dramatic arc'.

The Dramatic Arc

ACT ONE	ACT TWO	ACT THREE	ACT FOUR	ACT FIVE
		MIDPOINT		
CALL TO ACTION	INITIAL OBJECTIVE ACHIEVED		THINGS START TO GO WRONG	VICTORY OR DEFEAT

Everyone who works in drama has at some point stumbled upon

the concept of character arcs, whether to demand or decry them. But they do exist and the underlying symmetry of their shape hints at something deeper and more meaningful – much of which we will touch on later. Too simplistic? Charlie Kaufman, in attacking classic structure, certainly thinks so. 'To me, it's kind of like saying, "Well, when you do a painting, you always need to have sky here, the person here and the ground here." Well, you don't. In other art forms or other mediums, they accept that it's just something available for you to work with.'[16]

Kaufman's analogy is a false one. A cursory knowledge of art history will tell you that even if you dismiss the Renaissance idea of perfect scientific proportion or 'golden mean', art is still about finding order and balance of some kind; even Jackson Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists found shape within chaos. So when Lotte commits adultery by climbing inside the head of John Malkovich to have sex with her friend Maxine, Kaufman is not bucking a fashion. It happens exactly halfway through the film and it raises the stakes by turning her husband into an enemy. It's a classic midpoint. Kaufman mistakes content for form; the study of five-act structure reveals the underlying journey characters – and certainly those in *Being John Malkovich* – happily tread.

So why, then, is three-act structure so ubiquitous? Five-act structure was the dominant theatrical form for over two centuries. What made it so, and if it really was so important, what led to its demise?

Five Acts versus Three Acts

Aside from the creative impulse there are two main catalysts responsible for the development of any artistic form: biology and technology. It's likely that five-act structures became commonplace not simply because they created a dramatic template that allowed writers to access successful stories. The inability to stand for too long and the capacity of the human bladder in all likelihood also played a significant role in the demand for frequent breaks. When

you consider too that the candles used to light night-time and inter-ior performances had a finite duration – for some or all of these reasons five acts became the most acceptable way of framing stories.

The five-act form arguably reached its apotheosis in the work of Eugène Scribe (1791–1861), the French master who developed, indeed arguably created, the *pièce bien faite* or 'well-made play'. Scribe's prolific output (he 'wrote' over 400 works collected in no less than seventy-six volumes) is largely explained by his employ-ment of a team of juniors who followed a formula he honed to perfection – much as an author like James Patterson does today.[17] Scribe constructed his works around the classic Shakespearean form with each act ending in a turning point or reversal of fortune. He insisted on topical subject matter and demanded an ending where 'there is an equitable distribution of prizes in accordance with poetic justice' – one which was seen to reinforce 'the morals of the day'.[18]

Though the topicality of his plays means his work has dated, Scribe is an important figure, arguably the first to articulate a tem-plate for mass production. The writers' fear of orthodoxy and an understandable desire to place oneself above such pecuniary devices has meant that his reputation has suffered, obscuring the fact that his works were incredibly well structured, full of dashing rhetorical devices and – in their time – great fun. His success, popularity and focus on the primacy of entertainment made him, even in his own time, a subject of mockery. George Bernard Shaw disparagingly questioned: 'Why the devil should a man write like Scribe when he can write like Shakespeare or Molière, Aristophanes or Euripides?'[19] – but his influence is underrated and arguably profound.

A young Ibsen directed twenty-one of Scribe's plays,[20] and Scribe's impact on the giant of nineteenth-century theatre is clearly appar-ent. Ibsen's five-act *An Enemy of the People* follows the archetype to an almost uncanny degree, as do his four-act (*Hedda Gabler*) and three-act works (*Ghosts*) too. Indeed, as Professor Stephen Stanton has noted,[21] Ibsen 'founded a new school of dramatic art' largely by

employing Scribe's structure and merely substituting 'serious discus-sion for the conventional unravelling of situation in the last act.'[22] Shaw, too, is disingenuous – not only was he aware of Scribe's influ-ence on Ibsen,[23] there are uncanny similarities with his own work.

Without Scribe, then, there would have been no Ibsen or Shaw (at least not in quite the same form). It speaks volumes that the term 'well-made play' became a kind of shorthand abuse in the 1960s[24] – banishing, amongst others, Terence Rattigan from the English stage. It's a mindset that still lingers today – the suspicion that some-how craft must be the enemy of authenticity. It's a shame both for drama and for Scribe, whose influence not just on Ibsen and Shaw but on successive generations of playwrights from T. W. Robertson to Oscar Wilde, Bulwer-Lytton to J. B. Priestley, suggests that how-ever dated his work a greater acknowledgement of his pivotal position is overdue.

The nineteenth-century revival of three-act drama wasn't a reac-tion against Shakespearean form, but instead coincided with developments in comfort and technology. No longer did the storm in *The Tempest* need to be conjured by words alone – now you could sit on a velvet seat in a heated room and indulge yourself in the magic of stagecraft with all the wizardry of stage machinery and sophisticated lighting at your disposal. Suddenly a trip to the theatre was an altogether friendlier proposition; and even without gaudy spectacle (which must have felt much like the advent of widescreen or 3-D did to us) less frequent intervals had become an altogether more comfortable experience – one with far fewer extra-curricular distractions. Three acts resurfaced, which is why, coinciding as it did with the birth of cinema, film structure and consequently TV struc-ture owe their evolution to the theatre – it was simply the most convenient reference point to start from.

As we've seen, successful three-act works mimic the shape of the larger structure; indeed, the shape of the protagonist's journey in the former is more clearly marked out by the demands of the five-act form. Writers who struggle with the Hollywood paradigm often find the five-act shape gives them the control over their middle

section they otherwise find hard to deliver. Used wisely, it imposes a much stronger structure, creates regular gripping turning points that increase narrative tension and in turn eliminates one of the most common problems new screenwriters are heir to: the 'sagging', disjointed, confused and often hard-to-follow second act.

But five acts do something else too. As we dig deeper, the five-act form allows us to uncover the most extraordinary – and intricate – underlying pattern.

4

The Importance of Change

He locates the gun behind the toilet cistern, composes himself and moves towards the washroom door. In the small Italian restaurant, Sollozzo and McCluskey sit impatiently. He makes his way back to the table. He takes his seat, a subway train rumbles above but he hears nothing but the sound of his own heart. Diners talk on obliviously, the train screams past, he rises, pulls the gun, pauses and then in a moment plants a bullet in the forehead of both his guests. A mist of blood, a table upended, and Michael Corleone's life is changed for ever.

Michael's murder of a corrupt police captain and his gangster friend is a justly iconic Hollywood scene. But it's iconic not just in terms of *The Godfather*. Take a look at Michael's face. Note the eyes, and behind them the conflict between the loyal, law-abiding war hero and the murderer he's about to become; between the son whose future lay outside the family business and the act that will link him to their criminal trade for ever. From the moment he pulls the trigger, Michael's destiny is assured. The conflict between the person that was and the person that will be, and the act of will it takes to pass from one state to the other, are captured perfectly.[1]

In truth it's a scene that exists in every movie. Al Pacino, in this one moment, depicts the essence all drama is built on: change, and the internal struggle a character must undergo in order to achieve it.

We've seen that in three-dimensional stories the protagonist goes on a journey to overcome their flaw. They learn the quality they

need to achieve their goal; or, in other words, they change. Change is thus inextricably linked to dramatic desire: if a character wants something, they are going to have to change to get it.

In Aaron Sorkin's movie *A Few Good Men*, Lt Kaffee (Tom Cruise) sets himself the goal of bringing down the corrupt Colonel Jessup (Jack Nicholson). Kaffee is a smug, superficial, rather spoilt boy, who has built his fledgling career on avoiding courts and pleabargaining his clients' fates. But he wants to bring Jessup, the supremely powerful army chief, to book for bullying a raw recruit to death. Unless Kaffee grows up, overcomes his flaws and dares to take Jessup on in the courtroom unaided and man-to-man, he will not achieve his desire. His flaw is he's a child in a man's world; his want is justice. To get it he's going to have to change – to become a man. That, in one particular manifestation, is the dramatic archetype, one entirely built on change.

Walter White, the fictional anti-hero of *Breaking Bad*, puts it well. Attempting to explain chemistry to his uninterested science class, he declaims:

'Well, technically it's the study of matter. But I prefer to see it as the study of change. Now just think about this. Electrons, they change their energy levels. Molecules? Molecules change their bonds. Elements, they combine and change into compounds. Well, that's all of life, right? . . . It's solution then dissolution, over and over and over. It's growth, then decay, then transformation.'[2]

Change is the bedrock of life and consequently the bedrock of narrative. What's fascinating is that like stories themselves, change too has an underlying pattern. In every archetypal tale a template (or its shadow) can be found; an unchanging paradigm that can help us unlock the mysteries of structure.

What is this pattern and how does it work?

The Change Paradigm

It's possible to break down Ridley Scott and Callie Khouri's film *Thelma & Louise* into five distinct stages.

1. Two women set off on a camping trip. Louise is uptight and repressed and Thelma an innocent, living in a brutal marriage which she believes is happy. Stopping off at a bar, starting to let go, Thelma is subjected to an attempted rape. Louise confronts the attacker and shoots him dead. (INCITING INCIDENT)

2. Louise immediately decides to run from the scene of the crime and head to Mexico. Thelma is desperate to hand herself in and go back to her husband Darryl, but, after a phone call in which for the first time she sees him in his true repressive colours, she agrees to join Louise. Fugitives from justice, Mexico is in their sights.

3. The two women start to relax and enjoy themselves. On Thelma's instigation they pick up a handsome boy (Brad Pitt) and Louise contacts her boyfriend (Michael Madsen) for the first time, asking for help. That night in a motel both women have sex. The next morning Louise says a final goodbye to her man and Thelma, discovering her beau has robbed her, takes charge. On the run, with no income and no source of help, she holds up a supermarket. The police, already looking for them for the murder, have the first clear lead as to their whereabouts.

4. The police start to close in. Louise's insistence that they can't travel through Texas reveals that she herself was raped there many years ago. With their goal almost impossibly far away and their woes increased by the pursuit of a lecherous tanker driver, they drive through the night,

toying with the idea of handing themselves into the police. Instead, accidentally, they give their specific whereabouts away. (CRISIS)

5. With nothing left to lose, they turn on the tanker driver, lure him into a trap and then blow up his load. Cornered by the police they face the might of the authorities or . . . The two hold hands, accelerate and drive off the cliff into the canyon beyond.

Two ordinary women, oppressed by a brutal patriarchal society, find fulfilment beyond this petty bourgeois life in what, we are told, is not suicide but something more graceful, something with grandeur. With all the skills the writer, cast and director can muster, we are to believe that this ending – with the protagonists' flaws overcome – is some kind of ascension, some kind of reward.

Structure

I have no idea whether screenwriter Callie Khouri consciously wrote her script in five acts, but it's easy to see how the film can be divided into those classic archetypal stages. It's interesting to note, too, that in so doing an underlying symmetrical uniformity emerges. The 'third act' lasts forty minutes, bisected by a midpoint, while the duration of each other section is twenty minutes long.

The film charts the growth of Thelma from a dependent little girl to a liberated woman, while Louise goes on a similar journey, but from a different direction – from repressed to liberated too. Thelma learns self-determination; Louise, the ability to share. They are on equal and opposite roads of travel. In addition, if we agree on the central characters' flaws – that Thelma is an innocent, and Louise a world-weary cynic – it's possible to see not only that the underlying architecture of the story is built around opposites, but that both characters overcome their flaws and achieve self-realization in the same way.

What's more significant for now, however, is that they change according to an identical underlying pattern. This pattern is built around the characters' central flaws or needs. If we remember that at the beginning of every story these elements are unconscious, then it's possible to chart how those flaws are brought into the conscious mind, acted on, and finally fully overcome:

THELMA — LOUISE

ACT 1
Naïve — Cynical

Eyes open — Eyes open

New world — New world

ACT 2
Wants to call police — Wants to run

Prevaricates — Prevaricates

They agree to go to Mexico together

ACT 3
Singing in car/Thelma bonds with JD/Louise contacts Jimmy

Sex with boyfriends

Thelma takes charge – Louise lets go – Robbery

ACT 4
Fear of future

Regression to old selves

Do we embrace new selves or don't we?

ACT 5
Assertion of new selves

Blowing up of tanker

Suicide/ascension

Most of the significant points are shared – albeit approached from different directions; as Thelma learns greater self-confidence, Louise learns to let go. Their equal and opposite reactions complement each other until finally both find the balance within themselves to become complete.*

If you take any three-dimensional film and plot the way characters change in each act – how they become aware of and finally overcome their flaws – you will find a similar design. It's a pattern that is in effect a roadmap of change, one that charts a growing knowledge of a protagonist's flaws; their gradual acceptance, prevarication and final total rebirth. In essence, it looks like this:

THE ROADMAP OF CHANGE

ACT 1
No knowledge
Growing knowledge
Awakening

ACT 2
Doubt
Overcoming reluctance
Acceptance

ACT 3
Experimenting with knowledge
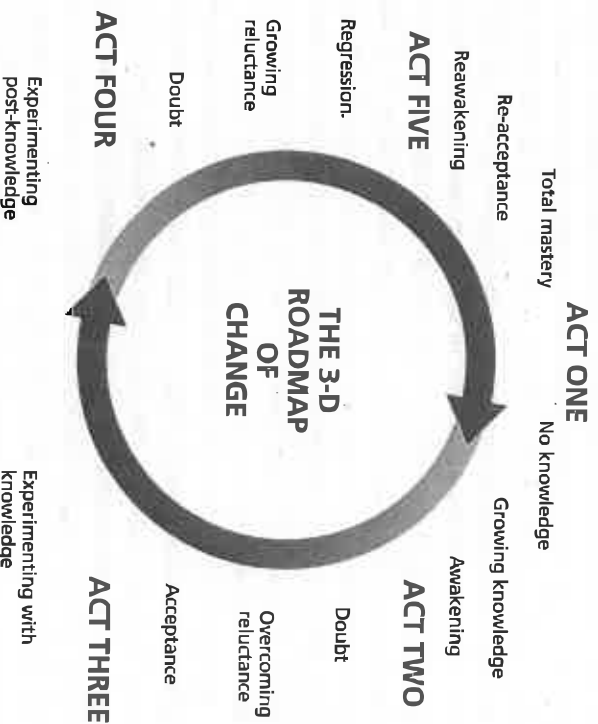MIDPOINT – KEY KNOWLEDGE
Experimenting post-knowledge

ACT 4
Doubt
Growing reluctance
Regression

* For the same pattern applied to *Hamlet* and others, see Appendix II.

ACT 5
Reawakening
Re-acceptance
Total mastery

Or graphically:

ACT FIVE
Regression.
Growing reluctance
Doubt
Reawakening
Re-acceptance
Total mastery

ACT ONE
No knowledge
Growing knowledge
Awakening

THE 3-D ROADMAP OF CHANGE

ACT TWO
Doubt
Overcoming reluctance
Acceptance

ACT FOUR
Experimenting post-knowledge

MIDPOINT
(Breakthrough) Key knowledge

ACT THREE
Experimenting with knowledge

Seinfeld deftly parodied the great clichés of screenwriting with its mantra 'No hugs, no learning' and many a writer will roll their eyes when a script editor dares to ask, 'What does your character learn?' As the paradigm illustrates, however, learning is central to *every* three-dimensional story: that is *how* the characters change; they learn to overcome their flaw and, what's more, they appear to learn according to a pattern. Their unconscious flaw is brought to

the surface, exposed to a new world, acted upon; the consequences of overcoming their flaw are explored, doubt and prevarication set in before, finally, they resolve to conquer it and embrace their new selves.

You see the same design in *Strictly Ballroom*, in *Attack the Block* and in *The Lives of Others*; you see it not just in David Hare's *My Zinc Bed*, but at some level in all his work. The films are different because the flaw is different; in *Strictly Ballroom* Scott has to learn courage; in *Attack the Block* Moses battles his own cowardice and in *The Lives of Others* Wiesler masters empathy. At the beginning of E.T. Jack scolds his younger brother Elliot for upsetting their mum: 'Damn it,' he says, 'why don't you grow up?' Think how other people feel for a change.' That's Elliot's flaw – he has to learn to empathize, he has to embark on a journey that finally allows him to let his closest friend go. Each act is a different stage in that struggle. He overcomes this; flaw gradually, sequentially, following the same pattern as Thelma and Louise.[3]

Reverse the pattern and you have *Macbeth* and *The Godfather*; their goodness corrupted to the very same design. In the archetype every character has a flaw; the 'roadmap' illustrates how they overcome it.* Too far-fetched? It *does* appear simplistic, but try examining almost any movie from *Casablanca* to *Iron Man*; *Juno* to *Bringing Up Baby*; *The African Queen* to *Casino Royale*. It's there too in Shakespeare, just as it is in Hare's *My Zinc Bed*, Kaufman's *Being John Malkovich* and Del Toro's work too.

But why? How can such uniform structure possibly exist?

Christopher Vogler and the Hero's Journey[4]

It's 1973 and *American Graffiti* has just become, dollar for dollar, the most successful movie of all time. George Lucas, its begetter, begins to ponder on the nature of stories. Where, he asks, are the big

* See Appendix V for illustration.

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mythological tales? Where are the westerns of today?[5] Discovering the work of the anthropologist Joseph Campbell, who had studied rights-of-passage stories across cultures, he realizes there are similarities between Campbell's Jungian interpretation of myth and one of his own nascent works. He fuses the two together with extraordinary results.[6] *Star Wars* is born, but so too is a monster that threatens to engulf the entire film industry.

The early 1970s were an extraordinarily vibrant time for American cinema. Any era that can produce *Five Easy Pieces*, *Taxi Driver* and *Chinatown* is a healthy one; but with a few (monumental) exceptions the movies weren't works that concentrated on what Hollywood does best – making vast amounts of cash. So when a hungry industry saw *Star Wars* become insanely popular and then learned it was built from a template and could thus be replicated, all hell broke loose. It was a gold rush. Suddenly there was a 'map', and if you didn't follow the map it was much harder to get your work made. However, it wasn't an easy map to read, and like many a prospector found, a short cut was hard to resist.

Which is where Christopher Vogler, a young script analyst at Disney, came in. He boiled down Campbell's epic study of mythology, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, into a seven-page memo[7] which, in time, was to give birth to a book, *The Writer's Journey*, and a template that was to influence a generation of film-makers and film executives. It was here that the ire of purists was incubated, and many writers began to feel that if you didn't follow what was rapidly becoming a philosopher's stone, your work simply wouldn't get produced: true, but as the journey structure of films from *Star Wars* to *The Lion King* really did seem able to transmute base metal, many felt it was.

So what did Vogler articulate? If you were being cruel you'd call it 'Campbell for Dummies'. The principles are simplistic, reductive, but contain the kernel of something extremely important – something of which even the author himself does not appear to have been aware. Vogler created a structural model based on Campbell's belief, formulated in 1949, of **a** *monomyth*.[9]

Campbell argued that within all the traditional stories of ancient cultures (normally supernatural ones concerning themselves with either aspects of human behaviour or origins of natural phenomena) there could be found one underlying identical pattern. This monomyth was fairly simple: 'A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.' What Campbell found in all myths was a quest to find a magic elixir, and the ensuing battle to return it to the homeland.

I first came across Vogler's (and thus Campbell's) work when I was a young script-reader myself and I dismissed it fairly abruptly. I was working on *EastEnders* and simply couldn't see how a hero's journey could apply to Pauline Fowler in the launderette. When I started to explore structural theory more seriously, I went back to it again. It is flawed and simplistic,[9] but it is useful in helping to prise open some key elements of structural design. Vogler's model consists of twelve key stages:

1. Heroes are introduced in the ordinary world where . . .
2. they receive the call to adventure.
3. They are reluctant at first or refuse the call, but . . .
4. are encouraged by a mentor to . . . .
5. cross the threshold and enter the special world where . . .
6. they encounter tests, allies and enemies.
7. They approach the inmost cave, crossing a second threshold . . .
8. where they endure the supreme ordeal.
9. They take possession of their reward and . . .
10. are pursued on the road back to the ordinary world, undergoing a spiritual death before . . .
11. they cross the third threshold, experience a resurrection and are transformed by the experience.
12. They return with the elixir, a boon or treasure to benefit the ordinary world.

Part of the reason I was so quick to dismiss it was because, like Freytag, it suggested the biggest point of drama, the supreme ordeal, was in the middle of the film – implying a backward journey in which the forces of antagonism didn't build. Equally, I couldn't understand how there could be two different screenwriting paradigms. Surely there could only be one or none at all?

Two simple actions were, however, able to unlock the conundrum. The first was to attempt to fit both paradigms together – to give Vogler's work an act structure. Vogler himself suggests how it fits into a three-act shape, but the five-act pattern is, once again, far more revealing:

ACT ONE
1. Heroes are introduced in the ordinary world where . . .
2. they receive the call to adventure.

ACT TWO
3. They are reluctant at first or refuse the call, but . . .
4. are encouraged by a mentor to . . . .
5. cross the threshold and enter the special world where . . .

ACT THREE
6. they encounter tests, allies and enemies.
7. They approach the inmost cave, crossing a second threshold . . . .
8. where they endure the supreme ordeal.
9. They take possession of their reward and . . .

ACT FOUR
10. are pursued on the road back to the ordinary world, undergoing a spiritual death before . . .

ACT FIVE
11. they cross the third threshold, experience a resurrection and are transformed by the experience.
12. They return with the elixir, a boon or treasure to benefit the ordinary world.

The second action was to apply it to an existing work – to actually feed in a character flaw.[10]

In Baz Luhrmann's *Strictly Ballroom*, Scott Hastings is a great dancer but he's crippled emotionally – a narcissistic, workaholic loner. He's desperate to win the Pan-Pacific ballroom championship but is unaware of his own more desperate need for intimacy. That's his flaw – and if you substitute the word 'elixir' for 'intimacy', something interesting happens.

ACT ONE
We meet ambitious, headstrong, emotionally stunted Scott in his limited world, a man obsessed with winning on his own terms.

He meets Fran, an amateur dancer, who dares to ask him to dance with her – he gets the call to be brave.

ACT TWO
He is reluctant at first, refusing the call, but is encouraged by her strength of character to . . . cross the threshold and dance with her in competition.

ACT THREE
By continuing to dance/flirt with her, he incites the ridicule of his peers, undergoing tests, winning allies and provoking enemies . . . until he crosses a second threshold where, finally brave enough to stand up to the dance authorities who have condemned them as a couple, he endures the supreme ordeal and casts them aside.

He takes possession of Fran – his reward, and shows her his vulnerability. He learns to dance with his heart, experimenting with a new way of seeing the world, but . . .

ACT FOUR
. . . is pursued on the road back to the ordinary world by doubts, insecurities and uncertainties as he finds it harder than he thought to deal with the pressures his newfound

bravery brings, those of peer pressure and the risk of failure. Worried he won't ever win a competition with Fran, he rejects her, facing spiritual death.

ACT FIVE
Scott must choose between winning and experiencing the intimacy of true love. He crosses a third threshold, experiencing a resurrection – finally and irrevocably standing up to his tormentors and dancing with Fran in the final competition – forgiving the rules – to the rhythm of his heart.

Transformed by the experience he returns with the elixir – a boon or treasure to benefit the ordinary world.

What you see – in clear, equal act divisions – is that the elixir, the elusive treasure that the hero or homeland needs, is exactly the same element the protagonist needs to cure their flaw. The story becomes the hunt for the key to overcoming Scott's unique problem instead.

It's the same with Thelma, who learns to take control, and for Louise, who learns to let go: the story shape is structured around how they find, retrieve and finally master the quality in their life that has eluded them. They start flawed, they find the elixir, learn how to use it, and end complete.

It's to Vogler's credit that he first detected Campbell's principles in modern movie-making and started to excavate the idea of common structures. His work is frustrating however, partly because Vogler himself makes no attempt to dig deeper than noting its resemblance to the 'monomyth'; partly because his own elucidations are often confused and partly because there's no real attempt (apart from some quasi-mystical mumbo jumbo) to understand *why*.[11]

Contrary to the hosannas that greeted its arrival, Vogler's paradigm is in essence nothing more than a three-act structure viewed from the protagonist's point of view; it's no more complex or original than that. It's most significant contribution may be as a

tool that helps us answer the all-important question 'why?' It's a question we get closer to resolving by looking in more depth at the one key feature it shares with 'traditional' structure: the 'midpoint' or 'supreme ordeal'.

The Importance of the Midpoint

We know that the midpoint in *The Godfather* is when Michael shoots the policeman and his life changes for ever; we know it's the moment the *Titanic* hits the iceberg. But what exactly is it? How does it unite the traditional Hollywood three-act archetype, Vogler's work and the Shakespearean five-act structure? Indeed, why does it exist at all?

The midpoint in our change paradigm corresponds to the moment of Vogler's 'supreme ordeal'. It's the point at which, in the 'Hero's Journey', the protagonist enters the 'enemy cave' and steals the 'elixir'; it is – in our paradigm – the moment of 'big change'.[12] It isn't necessarily the most dramatic moment, but it is a point of supreme significance. As *Macbeth* illustrates, it's the point from which there's no going back. A new 'truth' dawns on our hero for the first time; the protagonist has captured the treasure or found the 'elixir' to heal their flaw. But there's an important caveat . . . At this stage in the story they don't quite know how to handle it correctly. The 'journey back' is therefore built on how the hero reacts to possessing the 'elixir' and whether they will learn to master it in a wise and useful way.

In *The African Queen*, Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn play a river boatman and a missionary thrown together by a Nazi massacre in the heart of Africa. Despite their antipathy, they resolve to venture down a perilous river to blow up a German battleship. Exactly halfway through the film they must navigate past a heavily fortified fortress, an act which will quite probably lead to their deaths. Against the odds, however, they succeed, and giddy with their good fortune they embrace and kiss for the first time.

As in *Thelma & Louise*, the two protagonists are clear opposites – he, crude and worldly; she, refined and repressed. Emotionally the scene marks the point at which they overcome their flaws fully for the first time: he shows tenderness; she expresses sexual feeling. Their immediate reaction is to appear embarrassed and deny anything has happened. They want to return to their old selves but they can't; the die is cast and both must live with the consequences of their kiss. In addition, the film adds further jeopardy – the Germans are now aware of their presence; our two heroes must learn to assimilate their newfound intimacy while at the same time being pursued down-river by an angry and ruthless foe.

The midpoint, then, is the moment the protagonists are given a very powerful 'drug' but not the necessary knowledge to use it properly. How they develop that knowledge forms the underlying subject matter of the second half of the film. A well-designed midpoint has a risk/reward ratio: a character gains something vital, but in doing so ramps up the jeopardy around them. It's an obstacle that can dramatically raise the stakes and in the process force the heroes to change to overcome it. That change marks the point of no return for the protagonists; it's the end of the outward journey to find their 'solution' and the beginning of their journey back.

There's a very literal example in Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto*, where the whole story is built around an outgoing and return journey. The hero, Jaguar Paw, is a young warrior captured and taken hundreds of miles to be sacrificed while his pregnant wife is left behind to die. Exactly halfway through, at the moment of sacrifice, he escapes (fully asserting his courage for the first time) and races home, wounded, to rescue his partner pursued by the murderous, vengeful tribesmen he's humiliated. He starts the story a boy, lacking courage. He ends it, of course, a man. It's a suitably dramatic illustration of the change paradigm and significantly the biggest change seems to lie directly at the heart of the story.

This is as true in television as it is in film. The first three series of *Prime Suspect* were all two-parters, and at the end of each first

part — effectively each story's midpoint — you are left screaming warnings at Jane Tennison as she faces a new obstacle that changes the tenor of the whole investigation. Midpoints occur simply too often to be coincidences. They're not. Understanding their true significance unlocks a door, behind which lies the reason stories are the shape they are.

5

How We Tell Stories

'*Tom Jones* ... has 198 Chapters, divided into eighteen Books, the first six of which are set in the country, the second six on the road, and the final six in London.... Exactly in the middle of the novel most of the major characters pass through the same inn, but without meeting in combinations which would bring the story to a premature conclusion ... Symmetry,' says author and critic David Lodge, 'matters more to writers of fiction than readers consciously perceive.'[1]

E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* centres around an ambiguous incident in the Marabar Caves between a local doctor and an Englishwoman abroad. Everything in the novel leads first into then spirals out from this moment: an encounter, shrouded in mystery, in a dark cave that occurs exactly halfway through the book. The ubiquity with which such symmetry occurs in fiction suggests something structurally important is going on. Why is Homer's *Odyssey* separated into twenty-four books, with Odysseus arriving in Ithaca to reclaim his kingdom almost exactly halfway through? Why is Virgil's *Aeneid* arranged so similarly? 'The artist,' said Mondrian, 'spontaneously creates relationships in equilibrium—complete harmony [is] the goal of art.'[2] Again, we must be careful of oversimplification, but the existence of such a thing as a 'midpoint' suggests that stories tend towards a symmetrical nature, and that the centre of each may have a unique and specific importance.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but by looking at how midpoints work in other forms of story – in both two dimensions and with multiple protagonists — it's possible to find important clues as to something more than coincidence is occurring.

The 'Midpoint' in Two Dimensions

We've established that change is at the root of all drama, but at the same time noted that in two-dimensional stories protagonists don't change. But drama cannot exist without change; arguably it *is* change, so in a world where detectives stay constantly the same, what fuels the dramatic engine?

In a classic episode of *Columbo* or *Inspector Morse*, the protagonist seeks the 'truth' that lies behind the crime they're investigating. While the internal protagonist goes on a journey to discover who they really are and in doing so heals themself, the purely external protagonist learns the true nature of the crime they are investigating and in catching the perpetrators heals the world. They may not change inside – their knowledge *of* a situation changes instead.

Rather than a flaw, these characters have a deficiency of knowledge, which improves as the story progresses. Morse knows nothing of the killer at the beginning of his journey – but everything by the end. There is a pattern to this change, too. In the finale of series three of *Spooks* (by Ben Richards),[3] Adam, our hero, learns that his wife Fiona and Danny, a fellow agent, have been kidnapped. Again, it's possible to break the story down into the traditional five-act shape:

ACT ONE
Adam tells Fiona he 'wouldn't swap her for the whole world'. Fiona, on a routine mission with Danny, is kidnapped by North African terrorists. (Inciting incident)

ACT TWO
The kidnappers demand the British government immediately withdraw all forces from Iraq – the Prime Minister must announce it at a summit that evening. Fiona and Danny scrabble to get an SOS to their colleagues. Adam finally learns of their capture but at the cost of being captured by Khatera – another kidnapper – himself.

ACT THREE
MI5 become suspicious and begin a systematic search for their missing colleagues. Exactly halfway through the episode they manage to plant a bug on Adam and Khatera. MI5 now have knowledge of who the terrorists are. (Midpoint)

Danny and Fiona attempt to escape but are captured again. Danny is murdered trying to save Fiona, while Adam is forced to listen in horror down the phone.

ACT FOUR
Khatera insists Adam take her to the government conference to see the PM's announcement. Adam attempts to 'turn' her, but not quickly enough, and with the clock ticking he discovers something even worse. The terrorists aren't interested in a government announcement: Khatera has a bomb stitched inside her stomach, and has double-crossed Adam to lead her to the PM. (Crisis)

ACT FIVE
Adam learns Khatera's true motivation, talks her down and gets her to reveal Fiona's whereabouts. In a last-minute chase he saves the day, his wife and the country.

Not only does the story follow a classic structure, it should be possible to see that the gang's 'knowledge *of*' changes in much the same way as it would in three dimensions. At the beginning of the story Adam knows nothing; at the midpoint at the end of act two he has a first inkling of his adversaries; at the midpoint the identities of the kidnappers are revealed; and at the end of act four, he discovers that both he and the PM are standing next to a human bomb. (It is shown in graphic form overleaf.)

The midpoint in two dimensions, then, is the moment the protagonists start to really understand the nature of the forces ranged against them – the moment MI5 realize and identify who Adam, Fiona and Danny's kidnappers are. It's the 'moment of truth'.

ACT ONE
No knowledge of problem

Mastery of knowledge (Resolution)

Final battle (Climax)

Final choice

ACT FIVE
Full knowledge (Worst point)

Growing fear/anxiety

Consequences of knowledge

ACT FOUR
Experimenting with key knowledge of problem

MIDPOINT
(Breakthrough) Key knowledge

Experimenting with key knowledge of problem

ACT THREE
Acknowledging problem

Beginning to acknowledge problem

ACT TWO
Refusal to acknowledge problem

Knowledge of problem

Limited knowledge of problem

THE 2-D ROADMAP OF CHANGE

It's the same point at which James Bond – finding himself imprisoned with a laser beam rising between his legs – discovers Goldfinger's true nature,[4] or when Mitch McDeere realizes his firm of lawyers (*The Firm*) is actually a Mafia front. It's often the moment when the protagonist holds the solution to the mission in their hands. It can be the object of their chase (the Lektor decoding machine in *From Russia with Love*) or the subject of the chase (Javier Bardem's Silva in *Skyfall*).[5] In detective films, it's the piece of information that changes the story completely and offers the first tangible clue to the real perpetrator; and in the works of Agatha Christie it's often the murder itself, which is not, as might be assumed, the inciting incident – an honour reserved instead for the moment when Poirot's suspicions of foul play are first aroused.

It's the halfway stage of the thriller – the end of the outward

journey to achieve the protagonist's goal, and the beginning of the journey back. From this moment the protagonist's adventure can never be the same again. What it has in common with its 3-D equivalent is deeply significant. It's the moment of *truth* in both.

But what about other kinds of stories? Can the multi-protagonist films of Robert Altman, or Tarantino's form-shattering *Pulp Fiction*, really follow this model too?

Multiple Protagonists

George Lucas's *American Graffiti* tells the story of four teenagers, Curt, Steve, Toad and John, over one night in 1962. It's shortly before the death of J. F. Kennedy and, the film seems to imply, American innocence itself. Set in the small town of Modesto, California, where Lucas himself grew up, the narrative is built around Curt's sudden decision not to go east to university with his best friend Steve. With a backdrop of contemporary rock 'n' roll, it's a film that drips with nostalgia while prefiguring the tragedy yet to come; Toad (we learn in a powerful postscript) will be reported missing in Vietnam, while John will meet his fate at the hands of a drunk driver.

Each character has their own call to action, and each is thrown into the woods, both metaphorically (super-cool John Milner has to babysit a twelve-year-old girl; super-safe Curt finds himself committing a night's worth of crime) and literally (Toad and Steve find themselves abandoned in a forest exactly halfway through the film). Confronted with their opposites, each learns and changes in their own way; Curt, who was planning to stay in their small American town, decides to leave for college; and Steve, who was planning to go, decides instead to stay.

Though the characters are bound together by world and time scheme, each has their own story; each has their own inciting incident, turning points, crisis, climax and resolution. Each character will play out their own first act before the film moves on to the collective act two – and so on to the end of the work. And the midpoint? John

talks to twelve-year-old Carol in the town's car graveyard, not just a memento mori, but the first time any of the characters utters a word that doesn't try and project a fake persona – John speaks truth. One character's midpoint effectively embodies every other character's too; and from this point on the four teenagers must acknowledge their own truth in their own way. It's a touching scene that anchors the film beautifully. What does it tell us about our model?

Having multiple protagonists can seem complicated because individual stories can be connected in an array of different ways – by subject matter (*Parenthood*), by precinct (*Diner*), by character interaction (*Short Cuts*), by theme (*Babel*) or, indeed, any permutation of all of them. In its most sophisticated form – the television gang show of which either *The West Wing* or the very first episode of *ER* would be a good example – the work appears to have a fragmented, disjointed, episodic approach. But look closely and the same structural rules apply. All the key story components are there from inciting incident to resolution, but each is carried by a different character – the storytelling baton is passed from one to another as their individual vignettes pass by: the inciting incident will affect Dr Greene, the midpoint Nurse Hathaway and the climax Dr Benton. Thus different fragmented characters come together to create our recognizable story shape.

Even in a novel aspiring to explore economic policy in different parts of the Soviet Union (Francis Spufford's *Red Plenty*) you see the same – very sophisticated – version of this principle. The various protagonists, each with their own story and their own section, are pieced together to create a picture of the creation, rise and destruction of the Russian economy, and thus of communism itself. What appears arbitrary is in fact fixed and certain. It seems impossible to depart from the classic story shape.

Pulp Fiction by Quentin Tarantino and Roger Avary tells three separate stories: Pumpkin and Honey Bunny hold up a diner; Vincent has to take his boss's girl Mia out for dinner; and Butch fails to throw a boxing match. It appears to scorn narrative convention by

ordering events non-chronologically, but a closer look at its structure reveals something very familiar:

PROLOGUE – Honey Bunny and Pumpkin decide to hold up the diner in which they are seated.

ACT ONE
Jules and Vincent perform a hit for their boss Marsellus. A reluctant Vincent reveals he has been asked to take Marsellus's wife Mia our for dinner. (Inciting incident)

ACT TWO
Butch receives money to throw a fight. Vincent takes Mia to Jack Rabbit Slim's. They dance – and bond.

ACT THREE
Vincent goes back to her house. Mia ODs and, with the stakes raised to breaking point, Vincent takes a huge risk and plunges a giant syringe of adrenalin into her heart. (Midpoint)

Butch double-crosses Marsellus and not only fails to throw the fight; he beats his opponent so hard he kills him. His getaway is scuppered when he realizes he's left a watch – with massive sentimental value – behind. He returns to find Vincent waiting to avenge Marsellus, kills him, only to then run into Marsellus himself.

ACT FOUR
Marsellus and Butch are imprisoned by 'Zed', who sodomizes the former while the latter looks on. Butch saves him, and is thus free to return to his girlfriend. It's her questioning that elicits the immortal riposte to 'Who's Zed?' – 'Zed's dead' (Crisis)

ACT FIVE
We are back to the diner of the prologue. Pumpkin and Honey Bunny pull their guns, only to be seen off by Jules and Vincent. Jules

overcomes his flaw in an act of redemption; Vincent is resurrected to fight another day.

Pulp Fiction reorders narrative chronology to specifically create a 'Hero's Journey'. It hands the baton between the protagonists (most particularly Butch and Vincent) and by moving Vincent's death to before his showdown and victory in the diner, Tarantino and Avary create a classic call-to-action, adventure, death and rebirth structure. Each protagonist has their own clear three-act story, but by intercutting and reordering them, the writers create an overall five-act 'master shape' – the same shape as every other tale. At its heart lies one iconic scene: Vincent plunging adrenalin into Mia's heart, echoing the truth the film embraces – the triumph of life over death. This is of course the opposite of a death-dealing hitman's world, and it leaves the audience on their own particular high; a midpoint fittingly foreshadowing the achingly clever happy end.

The paradigm, then, provides the skeleton of two-dimensional, three-dimensional and multi-protagonist modes, whether told in genre or art-house form, and in each the 'truth' of every tale confronts the protagonists halfway through.

The Story Shape

Take any Shakespeare play, or indeed any film we've mentioned, and compare act one and act five, act two and act four, and both halves of act three. All form at least approximate mirror images of each other; each side of the midpoint reflects opposite mental states; each point of the outward journey is mirrored in its return. Now look at the change paradigm and note how act one and act five are mirrored too. It's hard to ignore the aspiration for symmetry.

In all the stories we've looked at or mentioned, whether two- or three-dimensional, there have been a striking number of elements in common:

- 'home' is threatened
- the protagonist suffers from some kind of flaw or problem
- the protagonist goes on a journey to find a cure or the key to the problem
- exactly halfway through they find a cure or key
- on the journey back they're forced to face up to the consequences of taking it
- they face some kind of literal or metaphorical death
- They're reborn as a new person, in full possession of the cure; in the process 'home' is saved.

What this would suggest is one underlying structure. There is, and it's very simple:

JOURNEY THERE; JOURNEY BACK

Often this shape can be literal and easy to spot: it's *Orpheus and Eurydice* – the descent into the Underworld to retrieve the object of supreme importance and return it to the land of the living. It's a shape that abounds in myth, from Persephone to Jason; it's also the story of Buster Keaton's foray into a Unionist stronghold to steal back his locomotive – *The General*; and it's familiar too from the earliest days of childhood:

Jack is poor, goes up a beanstalk, finds giant and goose that lays golden eggs, heads back with goose, defeats giant, no longer poor.

A dragon captures a princess. One man ventures out, kills the beast and returns with the princess, only to discover that the dragon isn't quite dead after all . . .

Boiled down to its essence, the shape becomes:

- there is a problem
- the protagonists go on a journey
- they find the solution

* they return
• the problem is solved.

Cinderella finds love with her prince and brings it back home. Hansel and Gretel find courage in outwitting the Witch and bring that back home too. Theseus slays the Minotaur; Perseus the Gorgon. A community needs fire . . . a man needs a woman . . . a woman is looking for love . . . the pattern in which something missing is found halfway through a story endlessly recurs. Even if the protagonists don't literally have to slay a dragon or steal fire from the gods, they always have to leave their home to solve the problem they find there, then bring that solution back home. Journey there; journey back.

'There are some stories that don't appear to fit this shape: *Saving Private Ryan*, *Apocalypse Now*, *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* and *The Godfather* are all structured around the protagonists getting what they want at the end, not halfway through their films. Why do they, and many others, conclude at the end of the outward journey?

The answer is simply that the archetypal 'journey there; journey back' structure is buried within the more obvious outward journey. Halfway through *Saving Private Ryan* the team learn of Ryan's whereabouts and that going on would be suicidal. They resolve to continue as hope and courage prevail. Halfway through *Apocalypse Now*, Chief insists they carry on with their normal duties and search a sampan. Willard shoots an innocent passenger and overrules him. At the midpoint of *E.T.*, E.T. phones home, and in *The Godfather*, as we've seen, Michael commits bloody murder right at the heart of the movie.

What all these incidents have in common should now be clear: we know the midpoint of each film is the moment when each protagonist embraces for the first time the quality they will need to become complete and finish their story. It's when they discover a *truth* about themselves. In an archetypal script, that truth will be an embodiment of everything that's the direct opposite of the person they were. The protagonist will embrace that truth and attempt to assimilate and understand it in the second half of the tale.

So in a three-dimensional drama the midpoint is where a character learns what they are capable of, and in a two-dimensional drama the truth about the adversary (or whatever the character's predicament is) is revealed. Often you will see both at the same time. In *The Godfather II* Michael discovers Fredo's betrayal at the midpoint, and takes the decision then (though we only learn this much later) to kill him.

All stories at some level are about a search for the truth of the subject they are exploring. Just as the act of perception involves seeking out the 'truth' of the thing perceived, so storytelling mimics that process. The 'truth' of the story, then, lies at the midpoint. The protagonist's action at this point will be to overcome that obstacle, assimilate that truth and begin the journey back – the journey to understand the implications of what that 'truth' really means.

Thus the 'journey there; journey back' structure exists in all archetypal stories. It's either literally presented (*Jack and the Beanstalk*), hidden underneath the literal story as part of an internal change (*E.T./The Godfather*) or embodied as knowledge sought, retrieved and acted upon (*Spooks*).

In all it should be possible to find some semblance of this familiar shape:

• a protagonist has a problem
• they leave their familiar world
• they go on a journey
• they find the thing they're looking for
• they take it back
• the consequences of taking it pursue them
• they overcome the consequences and solve their problem.[6]

We've already explored how stories involve characters being thrown into a world that represents the opposite of everything they believe and stand for – how an inciting incident embodies all the characteristics the protagonist lacks. The midpoint in every example we've used appears to contain the very essence of that missing

quality – the opposite of their initial state. It's the 'truth' of what they're looking for, or, as Joseph Campbell would put it, the elixir hidden in the enemy's cave.

The story shape allows individuals to find, possess and assimilate that which is missing within them. In two dimensions it's the vital clue that reveals the path to catching the crook or healing the patient; In both two and three dimensions it is an embodiment of truth that the protagonist must learn. The novelist Hilary Mantel was writing specifically about fairy tales when she wrote of the archetypal journey 'into the woods':

The journey into the wood is part of the journey of the psyche from birth through death to rebirth. Hansel and Gretel, the woodcutter's children, are familiar with the wood's verges but not its heart. Snow White is abandoned in the forest. What happens to us in the depths of the wood? Civilization and its discontents give way to the irrational and half-seen. Back in the village, with our soured relationships, we are neurotic, but the wood releases our full-blown madness. Birds and animals talk to us, departed souls speak. The tiny rush-light of the cottages is only a fading memory. Lost in the extinguishing darkness, we cannot see our hand before our face. We lose all sense of our body's boundaries. We melt into the trees, into the bark and the sap. From this green blood we draw new life, and are healed.[7]

Mantel's words reach far beyond her intended meaning to encompass the shape of all stories: the enduring pattern of how someone is found by being lost. All tales, then, are at some level a journey into the woods to find the missing part of us, to retrieve it and make ourselves whole. Storytelling is as simple – and complex – as that. That's the pattern. That's *how* we tell stories.

We must dig deeper though, into the microstructure – the smaller and seemingly unrelated aspects of storytelling. Here we will find that structure isn't just a clever and adaptable repeatable

pattern, as intricately structured as a snowflake, but is the root of character, dialogue, theme, genre: everything. 'Screenplays are structure,' said the writer of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, William Goldman,[8] but it's not just screenplays; it's all narrative. By discovering how and why this is so, perhaps we may be able to answer *why* we tell stories too.