

The Inciting Incident

LUCAS: Your mission is to proceed up to Nung River in a Navy Patrol boat. Pick up Colonel Kurtz's path at Nu Mung Ba, follow it, learn what you can along the way. When you find the colonel, infiltrate his team by whatever means available and terminate the colonel's command.

WILLARD: 'Terminate?' The colonel?

CIVILIAN: Terminate with extreme prejudice.

Apocalypse Now by John Milius and Francis Ford Coppola

In *Apocalypse Now* Captain Willard, a shell-shocked casualty of the Vietnam War, is called to HQ and given a mission: to head downriver and assassinate a rogue colonel. If all stories are a quest, then the inciting incidents are like this – an invitation to begin the journey. They say to the protagonist: 'This is your goal'.

If a story is 'once upon a time something happened', then the inciting incident is the 'something' that kick-starts a story. But is it always this simple?

In Peter Weir's 1985 film *Witness*, an Amish boy witnesses a murder in a railway station restroom. Detective John Book (Harrison Ford) is assigned to the case, and much to his horror discovers that McFee, his boss, is the killer. When McFee learns his dark deed has been uncovered, he attempts to kill Book, forcing him to flee the city with the boy and his mother to take refuge in the Amish community.

Screenwriting manuals tend to suggest the inciting incident is simply one explosion that blows a character's world apart, but if that's so, which part of *Witness* is the fabled 'call to action'?

The Inciting Incident

First acts, as we've noted, exist in tripartite form, mimicking the greater structural whole:

1. Set-up (including mini inciting incident)
2. Confrontation (conflict ending in crisis point)
3. (Climax and) Resolution.

In *Star Wars*, Princess Leia flees from the forces of Darth Vader, dispatching 3PO and R2D2 with a distress call. Meanwhile on the Planet of Tatooine, Luke Skywalker is finding life frustrating – no one takes him seriously. Luke discovers the distress call but does nothing. Only when his step-parents are brutally murdered does he resolve to leave his planet and seek revenge.

In *Some Like It Hot*, two musicians, Jerry and Joe, find themselves in a speakeasy raided by police. Strapped for cash and attempting to borrow a car to get to another gig, they accidentally witness the St Valentine's Day Massacre. Realizing their lives are in danger, they decide their only hope is to join a girl-band – as girls – and flee to Miami.

In both of these films, it's possible to detect three clear stages. In every first act:

- The protagonist will be alerted to a world outside their own.
- They will make a decision on how to react to this and pursue a course of action that will precipitate a crisis.
- This will force them to make a decision propelling them into a whole new universe.

The fractal story structure is immediately apparent – a pattern very clearly at work in *Witness*. The first stage of act one ends when Detective Book takes on the case of the Amish boy who saw the murder. The second stage culminates when McFee is revealed as the killer. In classical terms then – if we wish to pin down one specific moment in the first act as an inciting incident – it is simply the crisis point (the second turning point) of the first act.¹ Like all good crisis points, it's a subversion of expectation, a cliffhanger, an antithesis to what's gone before. It's the moment that presents Book with a choice: whether to

take a first big step outside his own limited world into the woods of new experience. Fractal structure reveals its mystery once again.

It's worth observing just how closely this follows the 'Roadmap of Change' we explored in Chapter 4. If act one of the paradigm moves from 'no awareness', via 'growing awareness' to 'awareness' (all of a new world) then the structural function of the inciting incident – to blow the protagonist into an alien world – should be even more apparent.

It's identical in *Thelma & Louise*. As the film starts, the two women are embarking on a camping trip. Stopping off at a roadside bar is a very clear step into a world different from their own. As they both start to let their hair down, they begin to shed more of their former selves – but this is drama; every action has a consequence. Thelma attracts the attentions of a local redneck who brutally assaults her. The crisis is precipitated. Given the choice to kill him or warn him off, Louise – provoked – shoots him in the head and they flee from the scene. Both are thrown into a completely alien world – into the woods again.

Sometimes an inciting incident isn't immediately clear because an audience isn't always aware from the start what the character's journey is going to be. Robert Redford's film *Ordinary People* tells the story of how teenager Conrad Jarrett, traumatized by the death of his brother, seeks psychiatric help. The journey into the woods – and thus the moment that kick-starts it – only becomes apparent when one realizes it's a journey towards healing. What catalyses that journey? The first stage of the first act ends when Conrad is thrown into a new trauma by his mother trashing his breakfast before him; this in turn sparks a journey of introspection, culminating in a flashback of his brother's death. For Conrad, it's a choice – continue to suffer, or seek help.² If the inciting incident is the *what*, then the flashback is clearly Conrad's motivation for seeking help, the *how* that will eventually enable him to find peace. In truth, all three parts are related – as they should be – but question and answer, the root of all structure, is inherent in the crisis and climax of the act.

In this formulation an inciting incident gives us two elements. The act one crisis point poses a question: will the protagonists make a break with their old selves? And, as we've already noted, for the story to really kick off, the protagonist is now required to make a decision how to respond. The 'explosion' and the desire it creates often occur in the first act, embodied in crisis and climax. It can be useful to look at these points as the *what* and the *how*. The crisis becomes the *what* – 'What's the problem?' And the climax the *how* – 'This is how I'm going to deal with it'.

Often that decision is made simply and quickly. In *Apocalypse Now* it's very clear that Willard – by accepting a proffered cigarette – has answered his call to action. In tripartite terms this decision is the third stage – the climax of the first act. However, it's not the only way of telling a story. The beauty of act structure is, as we've seen, that it's as infinitely adaptable as music. The most common adaptation – and I would argue the most misunderstood – was termed by Joseph Campbell the 'refusal of the call'. Once again its true nature becomes clear when viewed through the prism of the five-act form.

The Deferred Call

In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Jones's antipathy to Beloq is ignited in act one but lacks direction until he's given his mission at the end of act two. We know he detests Beloq by the end of the first act, but at this point that doesn't elicit a story. They only become rivals when Jones begins his quest for the Staff of Ra in the second act, for only then are they both engaged in the main action of the film. Technically Jones's action is a deferred response – antipathy is awoken in the first act but not given direction until the end of the second. *Erin Brockovich* has a similar pattern: the first act revolves around Erin's desperation to get a job, but the true story of the film, the exploration of the chemical crime, doesn't achieve focus until the end of the second stage. It's a very popular technique – in the BBC's *Life on Mars* it was actually part of the format: a crime would take place in the first act and either Sam or

Gene would refuse to join in the investigation until motivated by a further turning point that became the end of act two.

Why this long delay? The 'Roadmap of Change' illustrates the underlying pattern. In the second act, the protagonist moves from 'refusal to change' to 'acceptance'.³ In *Thelma & Louise*, Thelma initially refuses to accompany her friend to Mexico. Only after a patronizing, misogynistic phone call from her husband forty minutes into the film does she commit to the journey.

In three-dimensional drama it's quite common for a protagonist to begin their journey at the end of act one, but not the process of underlying change until the second act turning point – if you like, a buried 'refusal of the call'. In *Witness*, John Book flees into the Amish community at the end of the first act, but only when he hands his gun to Rachel twenty minutes later does the underlying journey from selfishness to selflessness really begin. It's a particularly common device in Shakespeare: Macbeth gets the idea to kill the king at the end of act one, but he prevaricates until the end of act two; Hamlet's ghostly father demands revenge at the end of act one, but only at the end of the second act does his son resolve on a plan ('the play's the thing') to entrap Claudius, and in *King Lear*, the first act ends with Lear walking out on Goneril, but it's not until the end of the second act that he finds himself rejected by both daughters and thus begins his true journey to the heart of the storm on the heath.⁴

Inciting incidents, then, are not the simple 'explosions' of screenwriting lore – they're manifestations of structure, a product of the way we order the world. Like every other act, they consist of thesis, antithesis and synthesis – a tripartite form containing a complete structure within themselves. If in doubt about story structure, it is always useful to refer to fairy tales for validation – they contain the DNA of almost every story we tell. Take *Jack and the Beanstalk*:

1. Down to their last penny, with father dead, Jack's mother sends him to market to sell Daisy, their cow.
2. On the way to market Jack succumbs to a mysterious stranger who offers to swap the cow for some magic

beans. Jack's mum is furious and throws the beans out of the window

3. Overnight a massive beanstalk grows right up into the sky.

Which part is the inciting incident? If one is forced to highlight one single aspect, then inciting incidents are the invitation to leave home and venture into the forest; to reject the thesis of the first stage for the synthesis of the new world. This is where the journey into the woods (or up the beanstalk) begins. But the incidents don't always have to be 'an explosion' either – there are no explosions in *Fawcett Towers*, merely an ever-growing complication. Hollywood tends to extremes; it's perfectly possible for a story to start with a guest turning up whom Basil doesn't like. They need not all begin with big bangs – they can simply be the first crack that allows the daylight in.⁵ If one pursues this line of thought, it's possible to argue that inciting incidents are simply the first important choice the protagonist makes in any story.

What the study of inciting incidents reveals to us is the ubiquity of the fractal story shape. Every act has two turning points within it, the latter of which acts as an explosion that invites the protagonist into an alien world. In the first act, that second turning point is called an inciting incident; if it's the penultimate act, it's called a crisis point. Structurally they're the same thing – a choice that presents itself to the protagonist, their name and function changing only according to their position in the story. In the first half of any tale, they lead further into the forest; in the second half they signpost the return.

All crisis points, like all choices, are invitations to venture into a different world. The inciting incident is merely the first invitation. But not only does this invitation occur across an overarching story and *within* acts; the fractal pattern continues and is replicated within the basic building blocks of drama – in the microstructure of scenes.