<u>Finding The Perfect Story Structure Master Class Notes – RMFW 2018</u>

- Finding The Perfect Story Structure
    - Or how outlining changed the way I write

- A disclaimer
    - All writing advice is subjective, including this class.
    - Your experience will vary.
    - Keep what helps you and jettison what doesn't.
    - Keep writing, keep practicing. That's the key to writing.
    - Whatever you hear, whatever you read, and however it may discourage you: DON'T QUIT!

- Overview
    - Why Outlining Intimidated Me and What Changed
    - Before You Can Plot, You Have To Have Good Characters
    - Where Story Structure Started
        - Three Act Structure
        - Archetypal Structure
        - Freytag's Pyramid
    - The Hero's Journey
    - The 7-point Story Structure
    - The Hollywood Formula
    - What is this Save The Cat thing?
    - Is There A Perfect System?

- Outlining 101
    - It's All About Character

- Character Dynamics
    - Regardless of Story Structure / System a solid story must have good characters. How many?
    - Protagonist
    - Antagonist
    - Relationship / Dynamic / Stakes Character
    - The use of a relationship character is a storytelling tool, not required, but if used it provides focus and plays a pivotal role in your story.

- Four critical Questions
    - Who is your hero / protagonist?
    - What are they trying to accomplish?
    - Who is trying to stop your hero?
    - What happens if your hero fails?

- Who is your hero?
  - Answer: A *sympathetic* character. Someone who has suffered undeserved misfortune. Are they admirable? Quirky? Fun?
  - They are the center of the story
  - Above all, your character must stand out from the others in the story, otherwise you have the wrong protagonist.

- What are they trying to accomplish? A compelling goal!
  - Professional (Public or Physical)
    - What everyone can see around the protagonist
    - The most obvious mission in the story
  - Personal (Emotional)
    - Means a lot, but with only a few
    - The hero's objective (driving the hero and their friends)
  - Private (Spiritual)
    - Deeply personal to the character and not shared
    - A private inner quest

- Who is trying to stop your hero?
  - A *powerful, committed* villain.
  - Either the true antagonist or a representation of the antagonist
  - They have created obstacles for the protagonist that are difficult and drive the story forward
  - They must also have GOALS. Ideally, their goals are diametrically opposed to those of your protagonist

- WHAT HAPPENS IF THEY FAIL?
  - Life and Death. All stories come down to that.

- The Central Question
  - Star Wars: Will Luke Skywalker become a Jedi, destroy the Death Star, and save Princess Leia?
  - At the end of the movie, were all of these resolved?
  - When were they resolved?

- Relationship Character
  - Also called Dynamic or Stakes Character
  - Is "on the journey" with the protagonist
  - Can provide wisdom and insight to the protagonist
  - Can be the victim or symbolize the victim
  - No matter what, they are the character who either from whom, or to whom, the theme of the story is communicated.

- The Stakes Character and Theme
  - If you're giving a "face" to the stakes of the story, how can that person convey the theme? What about an "inverse" theme?
    - Han Solo: "Ancient weapons and hokey religions are no match for a good blaster, kid."
  - Who comes back for Luke?

- Character archetypes
  - Another way to portray how your characters grow
  - Carol S. Pearson, *The Hero Within*

- There are six archetypes that people embody at different points of their lives:
  - The Innocent
  - The Orphan
  - The Magician
  - The Wanderer
  - The Martyr
  - The Warrior

- Character Growth Is Key
  - How do you make this work?
  - Your characters MUST have clear goals!
  - Your characters MUST know the stakes!
  - Do not be afraid of the all or nothing ending – in fact, that's part of the game.

- Don't Forget The Bad Guy
  - Remember, your antagonist must follow a similar path.
  - When you fail to involve the antagonist to the extent that you should, your book will die in Act 2
  - The antagonist's journey must be followed as well.  It's not front and center, but it's there.

- Aristotle (384BC – 322BC)
  - Believed that plot, what he called the sequence of events, was more important to a drama than the characters themselves.
  - He conceived the Three Act Structure.

- Character Archetypes
  - Carol S. Pearson, *The Hero Within*
  - There are six archetypes that real-life people embody at different phases of their lives:
    - The Innocent
    - The Orphan
    - The Magician

- The Wanderer
- The Martyr
- The Warrior

- Archetypes vs 3-Act Structure

    - Act I is all about the hero as an orphan.
        - Ex. Harry Potter, Luke Skywalker
    - Act II is split into two parts:
        - The hero as a wanderer
        - The hero as a warrior
    - Act III is all about the hero as a martyr
        - The character has undergone a major change and risks their life to achieve their goals

From Act I to Act 2A, the Hero loses innocence. From Act 2B to Act III the Hero becomes a magician.

- The 7-Point Story Structure
    - Hook
    - Plot Turn I
    - Pinch I
    - Midpoint
    - Pinch II
    - Plot Turn II
    - Resolution

- The Hook
    - Establishes your major characters
    - Establishes what they want
    - Needs to firmly show the protagonist in their "current" situation and why things would be better elsewhere.
    - Can start with either the protagonist, the antagonist, or the stakes character.
    - Example: Who do we see first in Star Wars?

- Plot Turn I
    - Plot Turn I is a sequence of events that culminates in "The Call To Adventure."
    - The protagonist is offered a chance to do something very different, and they take it after initially refusing it.
    - Luke goes back to Ben Kenobi and they leave Tattooine for Alderaan
    - Harry Potter decides to go to Hogwarts

- Pinch I
    - What you do with a pinch is up to you, but:

- Your pinch MUST put pressure on your characters and make them act! Failure is even better!
  - If your character is always successful, then they are not learning anything as they wander. They are supposed to be learning the tools they will need.
  - Don't be afraid to have your characters fail. It's really liberating.

- Midpoint
  - This is the point where the protagonist is done reacting to situations and decides to take action.
  - In movies, this point is almost always more clear.
  - In Star Wars, Luke is the one who comes up with the idea to take a handcuffed Chewbacca to the detention block, not Han Solo. This is the start of Luke's transition from Wanderer to Warrior

- Pinch II
  - Now, you're really putting the screws to the characters!
  - They may not totally fail here, but if you have them succeed in a major way, you risk cheapening the end of the story.
  - The biggest thing to remember is that this is where you show the character and their goal AS FAR APART AS POSSIBLE!
  - Character can have a near-death experience or die and be reborn – the idea is that they faced death and won

- Plot Turn II
  - Most of the time, Plot Turn II is the culmination of the protagonist's efforts.
  - This is where the protagonist has determined that they have all of the tools necessary to go up against the antagonist.
  - And the fight starts!

- Resolution
  - The story ends when:
    - The protagonist returns to their world forever changed
    - They've brought back the talisman
    - They've won or lost the conflict
  - What else is there?
    - Need to tease?
    - Show a future conflict?
    - 
- We're going to use 7-point Story Structure and you're going to BUILD the basic outline of your story. But we're going to do it BACKWARDS.

- Step one: Begin with the end
  - Start at the end – The Resolution
  - Everything in the story leads to this moment.

- What is your story about? Where is it going?
- What kind of resolution do you want?
  - Plot (Star Wars, 1977 – Destroy The Death Star!
  - Character (Empire Strikes Back – A Moral Decision for Luke)
- The end can be a state, not simply an action

- Step Two: back to the beginning
  - The Hook – Your character is in the opposite state they will be in eventually. If they are going to end up strong – start them weak.
  - Key Point – Advice from Kurt Vonnegut. "Start your story as close the end as possible."
  - What stands out to you most in this state?
    - Think back to the Four Questions you've already answered and it should be very clear.
    - Character growth equates to the story structure we don't always see.

- Step three: Midpoint
  - Go here because this is the moment, the precise moment you have in your mind, where your character shifts from reacting to the world around them to acting on their journey.
  - Example: Lord of the Rings – The Council of Elrond.
  - Your protagonist makes the choice to move toward their endstate (knowingly or otherwise).

- Step four: Plot turn 1
  - This event completes your Hook/Setup and moves the first act to its conclusion.
  - This is the Call To Adventure / Catalyst.
  - Could also be presented as a confrontation of new ideas but something puts things into motion.

- Step five: plot turn 2
  - From the Midpoint to the End, this is where your character may recognize that they have what it takes to win!
  - They get the last piece they need to take the battle to the bad guy.
  - There are two common types:
    - "The Power Is In You!"
    - "Grasping victory from the jaws of defeat."

- Step six: Back to PINCH One
  - This is the event that shakes the characters new experiences. They've passed into the new world, but something goes wrong.
  - Your character is the one to step up and solve a problem.
  - Sometimes, their really isn't a connected plot point here – in Harry Potter this is the Troll attack. No adults, just the kids, and they must act.

- STEP SEVEN: Pinch 2
  - Something goes very wrong, much more so than in Pinch 1. These are the very jaws of defeat from which victory must be grasped.
  - Mentors die, allies prove unreliable, and plans fail.
  - This is the Emotional Low Point / Dark Night of the Soul

- Seven Point Structure, especially used to create the story, is a skeleton. There are a few other things that can be used.
  - "Ice Monster" Prologue
  - Try/Fail Cycles
  - Subplots
    - Map them out the same way and weave them together
    - Action / Character / Romance / Betrayal

- Hollywood formula
  - How movies tell the same story in a very different way…and why you should pay attention

- Background
  - A good movie gets the audience asking and answering questions.
  - Driving the audience towards discovery is a critical task that a lot of movies just don't get.
  - The audience seeing a movie is all about emotional buy-in, not fluffy words or stunning action sequences (at least not all the time).

- By Way Of Comparison
  - Comparing 7-point story structure and Hollywood Formula requires a "tool" to compare the two.
  - Every Hollywood script is geared so that every page is one-minute of screen time.
  - While discussing Hollywood Formula, we're going to use a 120-page screenplay as a basis for comparing the two systems against one another.

- The Hook – Pages 1-30
  - The Introduction of all major characters
  - Clearly identifies what the characters WANT
  - Sets up and addresses issues
  - Addresses the coming conflict as being outside the main character

- The fateful decision
  - Major choice/ event for the protagonist that takes them out of their element and sends them on a journey. Sound familiar?
  - In a typical 90 minute screenplay, the general rule is that this happens by about the 11th page, or roughly 11 minutes into the film.

- In *The Martian*, Mark Watney is marooned on Mars at almost precisely 11 minutes into the film. He makes his fateful decision "I'm not gonna die here" at roughly the 20 minute mark.

- Asking Questions
  - Pages 30-59
  - The characters are asking questions and seeking knowledge about the situation they've gotten themselves into. Often seen as YES/NO transitions. There are 14 of them.
  - The questions should get tougher and cause the characters to not only ask questions about the mission, but themselves.

- Midpoint: Around page 60
  - Again, sound familiar?
  - This is the point of the story where the characters stop asking questions and take action. (Yes/No #7)
  - Example:
    - *Captain America: The First Avenger*
    - After touring with the USO, Cap is frustrated by the reactions of the troops to him and his show.  When they need help, he decides enough is enough.  He's a super soldier!

- One step forward, two steps back
  - Pages 61-89
  - Characters continue the "YES/NO" cycle from the Asking Questions portion of the script and face continually challenging obstacles. Yes/No cycles 8-14 take place here.
  - Here's how Star Wars played the YES/NO game from Fateful Decision to Emotional Low Point…

- The emotional low point
  - At the end of the YES/NO Cycles the protagonist needs to be at their lowest emotional point.
  - This is the point where they are FARTHEST from reaching their goals and feel like all hope is lost.
  - A lot of times, we see the character back to being alone, often times in a place where they are surrounded in a dark place.
  - Dark lighting, maybe rain falling, depressive imagery

- The final battle:
  - Pages 91-115
  - This is where the protagonist realizes that they have the tools to confront the antagonist and takes action.
  - Most importantly, the protagonist's goals are WITHIN REACH.
  - The action drives forward to resolution, no back steps.

- Example – Diana realizes that *she* is the weapon created by Zeus

- Resolution: Pages 115-120
    - The final battle culminates and the protagonist:
        - Gets what they want
        - Defeats the antagonist
        - Reconciles with the relationship character
        - The closer together those three things happen, the greater the emotional impact on the audience.
    - In Casablanca, this happens in the last 3:43.
    - Other recent examples:
    - *Deadpool* (4:12)
    - *Interstellar* (7:40)
    - The Martian (3:00)

- References
- *My Story Can Beat Up Your Story* – Jeffrey Alan Schecter
- *Anatomy of a Screenplay* – Dan Decker
- *The Hero Within* – Carol S. Pearson
- *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* – Joseph Campbell

The Story Structure Models Together (Three Act, Archetypal, 7-Point Story Structure, and Hollywood Formula):
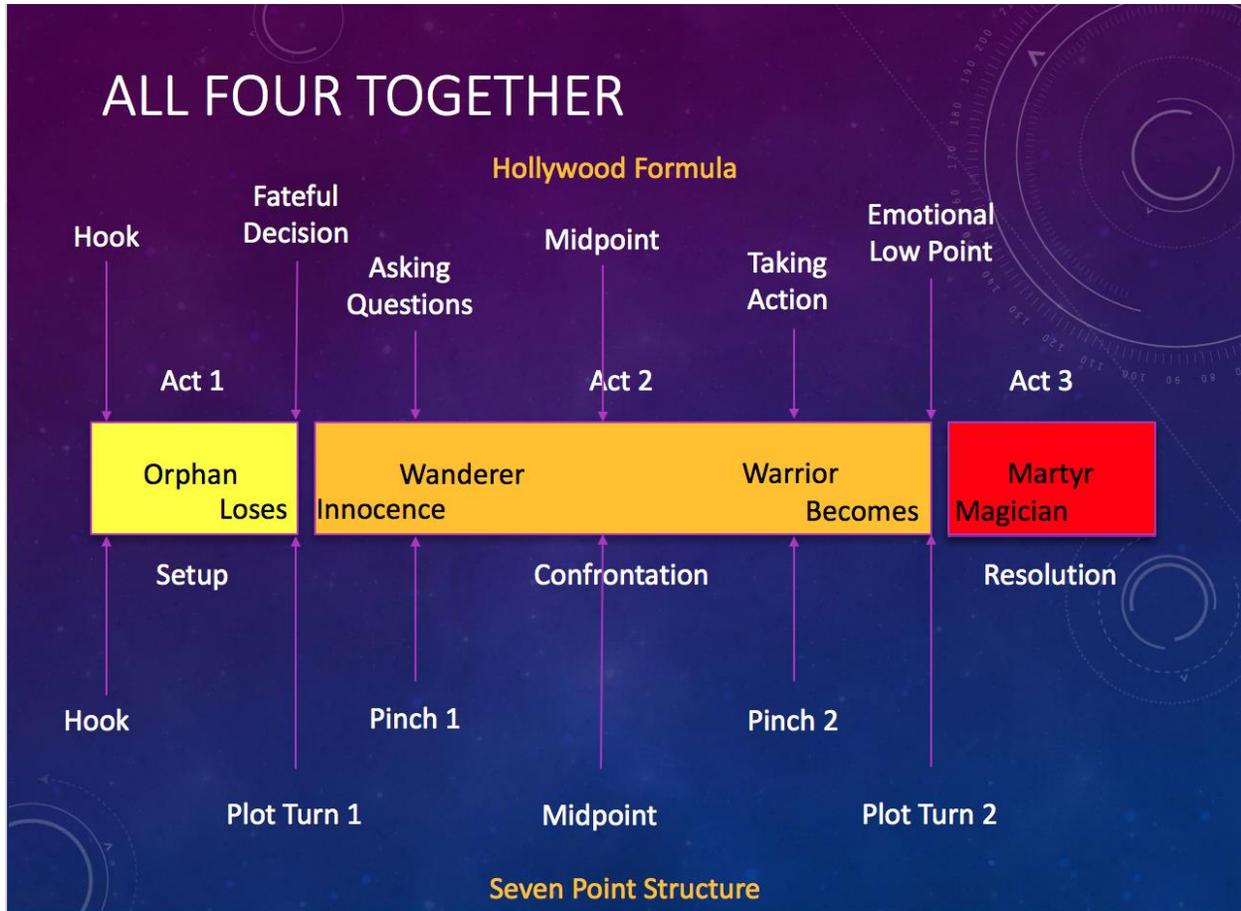


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Best of luck in your writing and outlining adventures!