

## THEME BEATS LOGIC

*“Don’t give me logic, give me emotion.”*

— Billy Wilder’s instructions to his writing partner, I.A.L. Diamond

Let’s start to explore this idea of *theme* versus *logic* by looking at the film *Raising Arizona*. Nicholas Cage and Holly Hunter play a couple desperate to have a child. They eventually resort to stealing an infant from a couple with sextuplets.

When the hapless couple brings the baby home, they all pose for a family photo. This snapshot of the new family is followed immediately by a shot of a man’s head popping out of a small mud hole. The man screams at the top of his lungs as rain pours down upon him. In the background, we can see a prison wall and searchlight. This man is escaping from prison. Is there any logic at all that says that a man escaping from prison should or would scream as he makes his escape? In fact, logic tells us just the opposite—a man escaping prison would be as quiet as can be. So why is it in the film? It’s because theme beats logic, and the mud-soaked screaming man makes a thematic point.

Look where the scene falls in the film—right after the snapshot of the happy family. So what? Think about it: Everything in the scene about the screaming man is made to resemble a birth. The man pops up headfirst. They could have started with his fingers pushing up out of the mud. That would make more sense, logically, if the man is digging, but this scene is not about logic. The head, covered with dripping mud, emerges

from a small hole. The man screams and screams and screams as he is “born” into the world. This is an ugly birth; there is something wrong with this birth. That’s the thematic point that beats logic. Nothing good happens for the Nick Cage and Holly Hunter characters after they steal the child. In fact, the escaped convict, along with another, seek refuge at the couple’s home. Hunter and Cage have no choice but to house the criminals because the criminals know about the kidnapping and threaten to expose their secret. The couple has no end of trouble until, at the film’s conclusion, the couple returns the child to his rightful parents.

This is a situation in which the armature is not spoken, but is evident in every decision made by the storytellers. The armature could be stated: It is wrong to deprive others of their happiness to gain your own. Or it could be stated: Nothing good can come from a bad deed.

You may have your own way of putting the film’s armature into words; make sure you can back it up with solid, consistent evidence in the story’s structure.

*Groundhog Day* and *Tootsie* have similar armatures: When the protagonists use their inside information to get the object of their desire into bed, it doesn’t work. In both cases the plan should work, but doesn’t, because it isn’t right thematically.

In *Tootsie* the armature is set up very well. What you see in the first act is that Dustin Hoffman’s character is a good actor, and what makes him a good actor is that he can’t lie

when he's acting. He has to be true to his character. In life, he is a liar, particularly to women. Through living the life of a fictional woman, who can be nothing but honest, Dustin's male alter ego learns to be honest with women.

One of my favorite examples of this is the story of *Groundhog Day*. I read somewhere that the studio wanted some kind of explanation as to why Bill Murray's character was reliving the same day over and over again. They wanted a gypsy curse or something along those lines. From what I understand, it was written and then cut because it didn't work. The reason, I think, is that it doesn't need a logical explanation. The audience understands why it is happening. It is what is supposed to happen thematically to teach Bill Murray a lesson. When he learns his lesson, the phenomenon stops and we all know why. We understand that "ever since that day" Bill Murray is a better man.

Remember that dramatizing the armature is a way of getting an intellectual idea across emotionally. If you learn to do this you'll move more people more often and more deeply.

Another favorite example of mine is in the 1968 version of *Planet of the Apes*. Here the armature is that "Man" is a violent and self-destructive creature. This point is hammered home again and again, topped off by the ending, which reveals that humans destroyed their own world.

Near the middle of the film, before the audience knows that the planet is, indeed, earth,

there is a courtroom scene. You see, the sentient apes of this world have discovered that Taylor (Charlton Heston) can speak. Humans on this world are mute. The courtroom scene takes place following this discovery.

Up till then, Taylor had been kept in a cage. There is no logical reason to have this scene in a courtroom. Why not have the scene at Taylor's cage? It all goes back to the armature that Man is a violent and self-destructive creature. This scene, *thematically*, is about putting humanity on trial. The storytellers even make a point of stripping Taylor of his clothes to make him appear more Adam-like. And it is no mistake that this scene *immediately* follows the discovery that Taylor possesses speech. Just *being* human, it seems, is a crime. It is a beautifully crafted scene that abandons logic for theme to support its armature.

## THE USE OF CLONES

*“Once upon a time there were three little pigs... .”*

What I am calling clones have been called other names—“mirror characters” and “reflection characters”—but, whatever you call them, they are useful tools of the storyteller’s craft.

A “clone” in story terms is a tool for showing, not telling. Clones are characters in your story that represent what *could*, *should* or *might* happen to the protagonist if s/he takes a particular path.

Two of the Three Little Pigs are clones. It is the failure of the first two pigs that allows us to measure the success of the last pig. This is a simple use of clones, and one of the most obvious to see.

But clones exist in more complicated stories as well. In J.R.R. Tolkein’s *Lord of the Rings*, the pitiful character of Golem is used to show what might happen to the hero Frodo if he is seduced by the power of a magic ring. Just as in the story of the three pigs, we measure the success of one character by the failure of another.

In *Tootsie*, the woman who is the object of Dustin Hoffman's desire is dating a lying womanizer. In one scene, Dustin, as a woman, confronts the womanizer and tells him that he understands his womanizing ways better than he thinks. This is a way for Dustin to "see" and confront himself.

The television show *ER* uses clones to great effect. Often a character will have a problem that is then mirrored by a patient. If a doctor has a drinking problem, for instance, the next thing you know she is treating a drunk driver. With that, she, and we, see what might happen if the character doesn't change her ways.

Going back to *The Wizard of Oz*, all three of Dorothy's companions are clones. They, like she, are looking for something they already have. Having clones is a way of dramatizing ideas; again, a way of showing instead of telling. As I said earlier, the audience sees that the Scarecrow has brains from the very first scene and it is reinforced throughout the story. Perhaps you may remember the line, "Don't cry, you'll rust again," said to the Tin Man. Hmm, turns out he does have a heart, after all.

John Steinbeck uses a cast of clones in his novel, *Of Mice and Men*. The armature of that story is that people need companionship. It is both dramatized as well as stated. If it has been a while since you've read it, I suggest you reread it soon. It is amazingly well-crafted. He knows what he wants to say and says it over and over again in different ways. And he does give you an intellectual idea on an emotional level.

In the story, George and Lennie are two migrant workers who travel and work together. Lennie, being mentally challenged, is a lot of trouble for George, but his love for Lennie and his needs for companionship are worth the trouble. Other characters even comment on how strange it is for these two to travel together.

One of the first things that happens is that George discovers that Lennie is petting a dead mouse he is keeping in his pocket. Lennie is a huge man and has no sense of his own strength and had killed the mouse by accident. Lennie enjoys the companionship of small, soft animals, and is obsessed with one day having rabbits to take care of.

When the duo reaches the ranch where they are to work, one of the people they meet is the boss's wife. She often flirts with the ranch hands because her husband doesn't pay attention to her—she craves companionship.

There is also on this ranch an old man who has an old dog. The other hands in the bunkhouse think the dog is worthless. A man named Carlson suggests that the man shoot the stinky old dog because it has, as he puts it, “‘Got no teeth,’ he said. ‘He’s all stiff with rheumatism. He ain’t no good to you.’”

The scene goes on with Candy, the old man, protesting, but Carlson won't let go of his idea that the dog should be shot.

Candy looked about unhappily. “No,” he said softly. “No, I couldn't do that. I had 'im too long.”

“He don't have no fun,” Carlson insisted. “And he stinks to beat hell. Tell you what. I'll shoot him for you. Then it won't be you what does it.”

Candy threw his legs off his bunk. He scratched the white stubble whiskers on his cheek nervously. “I'm so used to him,” he said softly. “I had him from a pup.”

“Well, you ain't bein' kind to him keepin' him alive,” said Carlson. “Look, Slim's bitch got a litter right now. I bet Slim would give you one of them pups to raise up, wouldn't you, Slim?”

The skinner had been studying the old dog with his calm eyes. “Yeah,” he said. “You can have a pup if you want to.” He seemed to shake himself free for speech. “Carl's right, Candy. That dog ain't no good to himself. I wisht somebody'd shoot me if I get old an' a cripple.”

Candy looked helplessly at him, for Slim's opinions were law. “Maybe it'd hurt him,” he suggested. “I don't mind takin' care of him.”

Carlson said: “The way I'd shoot him, he wouldn't feel nothing. I'd put the gun right there.” He pointed with his toe. “Right back of the head. He wouldn't even quiver.”

At last Carlson said: “If you want me to, I'll put the old devil out of his misery right now and get it over with. Ain't nothing left for him. Can't eat, can't see, can't even walk without hurtin'.”

Candy said hopefully: "You ain't got no gun."

"The hell I ain't. Got a Luger. It won't hurt him none at all."

Candy said: "Maybe tomorra. Le's wait till tomorra."

"I don't see no reason for it," said Carlson. He went to his bunk, pulled his bag from underneath it, and took out a Luger pistol. "Let's get it over with," he said. "We can't sleep with him stinkin' around in here." He put the pistol in his hip pocket.

Candy looked a long time at Slim to try to find some reversal. And Slim gave him none. At last Candy said softly and hopelessly: "Awright—take 'im." He did not look down at the dog at all. He lay back on his bunk and crossed his arms behind his head and stared at the ceiling.

From his pocket Carlson took a little leather thong. He stooped over and tied it around the dog's neck. All the men except Candy watched him. "Come, boy. Come on, boy," he said gently. And he said apologetically to Candy: "He won't even feel it," Candy did not move nor answer him. He twitched the thong. "Come on, boy."

The old dog got slowly and stiffly to his feet and followed the gently-pulling leash.

Carlson takes the dog out to shoot him, and the old man lies on his back looking at the ceiling, and after an agonizingly long time, a shot is heard in the distance. With this, Candy rolls over in his bunk and faces the wall.

We see how much this stinky, old dog means to this man. The dog and the old man are clones of Lennie and George.

How do I know that I'm not reading all of this into the story? One way to know is the repetition of the armature. It is dramatized over and over again. The scene where they shoot the old man's dog is a well-written scene, but what makes it great is that it nails home the armature using emotion to do so.

Another way the point is nailed home is in the scene wherein George has gone to town with some of the other ranch hands, leaving Lennie alone. Lennie stumbles on Crooks, the black stable hand, in his shed next to the barn. Crooks is not allowed in the bunkhouse because he is black, and as a result is lonesome.

During their exchange Crooks says this to Lennie:

Crooks said gently: "Maybe you can see now. You got George. You know he's goin' to come back. S'pose you didn't have nobody. S'pose you couldn't go into the bunk-house and play rummy 'cause you was black. How'd you like that? S'pose you had to sit out here an' read books. Sure you could play horseshoes till it got dark, but then you got to read books. Books ain't no good. A guy needs somebody—to be near him." He whined: "A guy goes nuts if he ain't got nobody. Don't make no difference who the guy is, long's he's with you. I tell ya," he cried, "I tell ya a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick."

As you can see, the armature is stated. I read or see stories all the time in which characters say wise things and the audience nods knowingly, but it means nothing if the structural elements of the story don't back it up. Every decision one makes when constructing a story must contribute in some way to the armature, or why is it there?

Steinbeck makes good use of clones in this story. And if you doubt for a minute the old man's dog isn't a clone for Lennie, at one point Crooks speculates about Lennie without George:

*"Want me ta tell ya what'll happen? They'll take ya to the booby hatch. They'll tie ya up with a collar, like a dog."*

Steinbeck was a master at the use of invisible ink. He understood how secondary characters could help solidify his armature and dramatize his point. One of the ironies of invisible ink is just how blatant one can be when applying it. The audience will never see it unless they have been trained to see the footprints in the grass.

Another master of invisible ink was storyteller Paddy Chayefsky. He used clones with deft skill in his teleplay and movie *Marty*.

*Marty* was a television play written in the 1950s. It made such a huge impact that the network was deluged with letters asking that it be performed again. This was in the days

of live television, and there were no such things as reruns. Not only was it performed again, but also it was made into a film that won the Best Picture Oscar.

*Marty* is about an Italian-American man who can't seem to get a date. He is considered ugly, and in his world he is also considered the male equivalent of an old maid. He lives with his mother, who pesters him to get married. These elements are the conflict in the piece. So, at the fulcrum of the story, Marty finds a woman who likes him. Problem solved. This is what both Marty and his mother have wanted. But here's the thing about drama; lack of conflict kills it. So where does the conflict come in now? Marty's mother has a clone, her sister. So what Chayefsky does now is brilliant. After Marty meets his girlfriend, and it looks like things are going well, Chayefsky cuts to this scene:

Then the mother addresses herself to Aunt  
Catherine.

MOTHER: We gotta post card from my son, Nickie,  
and his bride this morning. They're in Florida  
inna big hotel. Everything is very nice.

AUNT: That's nice.

MOTHER: Catherine, I want you come live with me  
in my house with Marty and me. In my house, you  
have your own room. You don't have to sleep onna  
couch inna living room like here.

The aunt looks slowly and directly at the  
mother.

Catherine, your son is married. He got his own home. Leave him in peace. He wants to be alone with his wife. They don't want no old lady sitting inna balcony. Come and live with me. We will cook in the kitchen and talk like when we were girls. You are dear to me, and you are dear to Marty. We are pleased for you to come.

AUNT: Did they come to see you?

MOTHER: Yes.

AUNT: Did my son Thomas come with her?

MOTHER: Your son Thomas was there.

AUNT: Did he also say he wishes to cast his mother from his house?

MOTHER: Catherine, don't make an opera outta this. The three-a you anna baby live in three skinny rooms. You are an old goat, and she has an Italian temper. She is a good girl, but you drive her crazy. Leave them alone. They have their own life.

The old aunt turns her head slowly and looks her sister square in the face. Then she rises slowly from her chair.

AUNT: [Coldly] Get outta here. This is my son's

house. This is where I live. I am not to be cast  
out inna street like a newspaper.

The mother likewise rises. The two old women  
face each other directly.

MOTHER: Catherine, you are very dear to me. We  
have cried many times together. When my husband  
died, I would have gone insane if it were not  
for you. I ask you  
to come to my house because I can make you  
happy. Please come to my house.

The two sisters regard each other. Then Aunt  
Catherine sits again in her oaken chair, and the  
mother returns to her seat. The hardened muscles  
in the old aunt's face suddenly slacken, and she  
turns to her sister.

AUNT: Theresa, what shall become of me?

MOTHER: Catherine.

AUNT: It's gonna happen to you. Mark it well.  
These terrible years. I'm afraid look inna  
mirror. I'm afraid I'm gonna see an old lady  
with white hair, like the old ladies inna park,  
little bundles inna black shawl, waiting for the  
coffin. I'm fifty-six years old. What am I to do  
with myself? I have strength in my hands. I  
wanna cook. I wanna clean. I wanna make dinner  
for my children. I wanna be of use to somebody.

Am I an old dog to lie in fronta the fire till  
my eyes close. These are terrible years, Theresa  
Terrible years!

MOTHER: Catherine, my sister . . .

The old aunt stares, distraught, at the mother.

AUNT: It's gonna happen to you! It's gonna  
happen to you! What will you do if Marty gets  
married! What will you cook?! What happen to  
alla children tumbling in alla rooms?! Where is  
the noise?! It is a curse to be a widow. A  
curse! What will you do if Marty gets married?!  
What will you do?!

She stares at the mother—her deep, gaunt eyes  
haggard and pained. The mother stares back for a  
moment, then her own eyes close. The aunt has  
hit home. The aunt sinks back onto her chair,  
sitting stiffly, her arms on the thick armrests.  
The mother sits hunched a little forward, her  
hands nervously folded in her lap.

AUNT: [Quietly] I will put my clothes inna bag  
and I will come to you tomorrow.

The camera slowly dollies back from the two  
somber sisters.

SLOW FADE-OUT.

This starts to worry Marty's mother and she changes her attitude about his getting married. It's very skillfully done and keeps the conflict, and therefore the interest, going.

Understand that not all stories use clones, but they are useful tools to put in your storyteller's toolbox. A storyteller should know why every character in her story exists. They should not be there just to "flesh out the world," as I often hear my students say.

In Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, Jimmy Stewart plays a man with a broken leg who doesn't want to marry his girlfriend, Grace Kelly.

Jimmy plays a photojournalist who lives a life of high adventure. In fact, he broke his leg while shooting a racecar accident. The reason he doesn't want to marry his fashion designer girlfriend is that he feels she doesn't have enough backbone. He feels they would be incompatible in a happily-ever-after situation.

Jimmy is confined to a wheelchair and so he passes the time by looking out his window and spying on his neighbors. The thing is, all of the neighbors are clones. They are all in various stages of romantic relationships. There is a honeymoon couple, an older childless couple, a sexy woman who has men fawning over her, a woman who can't get a date, and a couple that is always arguing—each one a distorted clone of Jimmy and Grace.

By the way, Jimmy changes his mind about Grace when he believes that one of his neighbors has murdered his wife and he sees just how much backbone she has as she

throws herself into the adventure.

To the untrained eye, clone characters appear to be nothing more than secondary characters populating the story's world. But in the hands of a skillful storyteller, they are the invisible ink that helps illuminate the story's point.

## Chapter IV

**RITUAL PAIN**

**PERSONAL HELL EXERCISE**

**THE CRUCIFIXION**

**FROM BUTTERFLY TO CATERPILLAR**

**FLIP-FLOPS**

**CHARACTERS WHO DON'T CHANGE**

**KILLING THE PROTAGONIST**

## **RITUAL PAIN**

*“Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die.”*

—Blues song lyric

So far I have mentioned character change, but without really discussing it. I will get to it in a few seconds.

A few years ago, when I was working on a spec screenplay that involved gangs, I visited a school with a lot of gang activity and asked the kids about how gangs worked. One of the things that I found out was that in order to join a gang you had to be “jumped” in. What that means is that you let the other gang members beat the crap out of you for a proscribed amount of time, anywhere from two to five minutes. After that, you are a member of the gang.

This sounded so barbaric to me. I didn’t understand why anyone would allow himself or herself to be abused in this way.

A couple of years after that, I was writing a comic book that had an Australian Aborigine as one of the main characters. While doing research, I read about one tribe that would knock one or two teeth out of adolescents as part of their initiation into adulthood.

I thought back on years earlier when a good friend of mine was rushing a fraternity. I could have never let myself be humiliated the way he allowed himself to be.

I began to see a pattern—groups of men or boys all have some kind of harsh initiation into their fold. It doesn't seem to be anything that has to be taught; it appears to be inherent behavior.

Later, I was talking with an African shaman who lived in my neighborhood and he began to talk about the manhood ceremony in his village. He talked about tribal peoples all over the world having similar ceremonies that involved what he called “ritual pain.” Sometimes it is ritual scarification or tattooing. Sometimes it is a solo hunt for a ferocious beast. Other times it is to survive alone in the forest. In some cultures it involves a circumcision. Blood or the possibility of bloodletting is almost always part of the ritual. Like the street gangs say, “blood in, blood out.” Meaning that you must undergo the pain to get into, or get out of, a gang.

In all cases, the purpose of this ritual seems to be about tearing the individual down and then transforming them from boyhood to manhood. At the end of the ritual they are considered full-fledged members of the group with the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of an adult of said group.

I asked the shaman about women, and he thought that women don't usually have these

kinds of ceremonies because they have a natural bloodletting that signifies their transformation from girls to women. Plus, they often have blood and/or pain when they lose their virginity. And we all know that there is pain in childbirth, and that does certainly change a woman. There is female circumcision, but it is imposed by men on women; therefore, it is not included here.

I started to think of this idea in story terms. The second act is a kind of ritual pain that changes your character. Usually your character has what has been called a fatal flaw. There is something they need to learn before they can be transformed into a better, more mature, person.

What is it that Elliot's brother says to him in *E.T.*? "Why don't you grow up and think how other people feel?"

We are all resistant to change. There is an old blues song that contains the lyric, "Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die."

There is more than likely something about yourself that you would like to change or that you should change but it is too difficult. I don't know why the world works this way, but the things we should do are always the most difficult. So we rarely run toward change. This is true of your characters as well.

In *Toy Story*, Buzz Lightyear won't believe that he is a toy and not a space ranger. Also

in *Toy Story*, Woody has to learn to share the affection of his owner with Buzz. When you see the film again, you'll see that this transformation is not an easy one for them, but they are better "people" when they do change.

In *Toy Story 2*, Woody is in danger of being discarded and meets Jesse, a clone, who tells him what his fate might be. It is painful for both of them, but they both realize that they have value.

Understanding story allowed Pixar to make one of the few sequels that measures up to the original. John Lasseter and the people at Pixar understand story as well as anyone. Study these films.

Look at *Jaws* again. Take a man afraid of the water, subject him to the ritual pain of doing battle with a shark, and that pain transforms him. Cures him.

James Cameron took what could have been a little B movie and made *Terminator* into a surprise box office hit. He put Linda Hamilton's character, Sarah Connor, through the ritual pain of being hunted down and nearly killed. In the end she is transformed into a woman who knows that her life matters. She has also been hardened by the experience and seems less girlish. Grown up.

In *Terminator 2*, it is Sarah Connor who becomes the terminator. It is she who tries to kill a man for something he will do in the future. Through ritual pain she realizes that she

has become the very thing she hates.

In *Aliens*, Cameron had Sigourney Weaver's character, Ripley, is plagued by nightmares of the creature she had survived in the first film. Through the ritual pain of battling these creatures again, she purges herself of these nightmares and takes back her life.

Billy Wilder understood the power of character change so well that when the American Film Institute listed the top one hundred films of all time, four were his.

In *Sunset Boulevard*, Wilder had character Joe Gillis, an out-of-work Hollywood screenwriter, sells out for a little security and becomes the kept man of an older ex-movie star. He becomes her pet. In fact, when they first meet, the pet chimp of the has-been star has just died. It is no mistake that it is following this that Joe Gillis moves into the woman's home. At one point in the film she dresses Joe in a tux—sometimes called a monkey suit. It is through the ritual pain of being a kept man that Joe Gillis learns that having a swimming pool isn't worth selling out his principles.

This idea of selling out shows up again and again in Wilder's films. In *The Apartment*, Jack Lemmon plays a man who, to climb the corporate ladder, lends his apartment out to adulterous executives at the insurance company where he works. Sometimes this means not getting into his own apartment and having to sleep in the park. He, of course, learns to stand up for himself.

Also in *The Apartment*, Shirley Maclaine plays a woman who is having an affair with one of the aforementioned executives. This idea of selling out, or prostituting oneself, hits hard when the executive, not having time to buy a Christmas present for his mistress, hands Shirley a hundred dollar bill as a gift. It is through the ritual pain of being made to feel cheap that Shirley learns to respect herself enough to be with a man who will commit to her fully.

*The Apartment* has two characters who change, but they both learn essentially the same lesson. They are clones of one another.

Because change is never easy, and is resisted, it is your job as a storyteller to apply as much pressure on your characters as possible. You must back them into a corner and force them to change. Make it as painful as you can. Bring them to the brink of physical or emotional death if you possibly can. Your protagonist will be measured by the size of her struggle, so don't pull any punches.

Those who believe in reincarnation believe that we die and are reborn until we learn whatever we were sent to learn in life. When we finally attain wisdom, we ascend to a higher plane of existence. We are rewarded.

You don't need to believe in reincarnation to see this idea played out. Many of us know people who repeat the same mistakes over and over in their lives. They might, for instance, keep dating people who disrespect them. Until they realize that they bring this

on themselves, they will never be happy. They will never get their reward.

*Groundhog Day* is a great example of this concept in story form. Bill Murray is, in a sense, reborn every day. At one point he even tries to kill himself to get out of this cycle, but it doesn't work. It is only when he starts to focus on things outside of himself, and becomes a better person, that he is able to reap his reward. He then "ascends" and is able to move on to a higher level of existence.

A character always knows what he *wants*, but hardly ever what he *needs*. In the end, the character usually gets close to what he wants and chooses the need instead. For example, in *Casablanca*, Bogart gets the girl—the very thing he's wanted through the entire story. But he tells her to go with her husband. His need is to get over Ingrid Bergman. When he is holding tightly to his want he is a bitter, selfish man. He even says, "I stick my neck out for no one." In the end, he risks his neck to assure that the woman he loves can leave with her husband. We know he is a better person. He has grown. He has ascended.

In *The Apartment*, Jack Lemmon gets the promotion he's been after from the beginning of the story. But he is done compromising his self-respect, and turns down the job. He has ascended. This act helps him get his real reward, the woman he loves.

In *E.T.*, Elliot wants his friend to stay with him, but helps him get home. He puts the needs of his friend ahead of his own desires. It is painful for him, but it is the right thing

to do. Elliot ascends to a better place through suffering ritual pain.

Most viewers of *E.T.* are unaware that they are watching the transformation of a character from a selfish child to a caring human being, but they do feel it.

Ritual pain means painfully killing off one aspect of a character's personality to make room for something new.

Character transformation and growth is one of the most powerful forms of invisible ink, and you would do well to include it in your work.

## **PERSONAL HELL EXERCISE**

This exercise is to show you how to come up with the type of ritual pain that is appropriate for your character.

In Greek mythology, Persephone, the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, was abducted by Hades and taken to the Underworld, the realm of the dead.

I was just reading this story and realized that all characters of change take a journey to the underworld. Characters must confront the very thing they would least like to, and confronting this thing is a kind of hell. More precisely, it is their own personal hell. But through this confrontation, they are transformed.

Let's revisit our friend, King Midas. If all the king wants is gold, then as a storyteller creating that story one would have to find a way to put Midas in Hell, to take him to the underworld. The storyteller granted the King his wish that everything Midas touched turned to gold. It wasn't long before King Midas realized that this blessing was a curse when he changed his beloved daughter into gold. Midas learns that some things are more precious than gold. A trip to one's personal hell changes one.

In the movie *Jaws*, a man is deathly afraid of the water, so where do you suppose his

personal hell is? In the middle of the ocean where a vicious shark swims about, that's where.

“Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?” says Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, when he finds he must descend into a pit of the slithering reptiles. But we know why it had to be snakes—it's because as we find out early on in the film, Indiana Jones hates snakes. To get the prize he seeks, he must take a trip to the Underworld, to his own personal hell.

In the classic film *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey wishes he had never been born. In his personal hell, he is granted the chance to see what the world would be like without him, and it's not a pretty place.

In Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*, a young woman wishes she had more excitement in her life. She gets more excitement when her favorite uncle comes to town and turns out to be a murderer.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy wants to runaway from home, so a twister takes her far away. And, of course, all she wants is to get back home, because she is in her personal hell.

In *Finding Nemo*, the father desperately tries to keep his son safe by never letting him out of his sight, and keeping him close to home. What happens? His son is taken away into

the ocean. This is the father's personal hell.

“Of all the gin joints in all the world she had to walk into mine,” goes Bogart's famous line from the film *Casablanca*. He says this because the woman he was in love with, and wants to forget, has just come into his world. This is his personal hell.

This is one of the simplest ways to apply invisible ink to your work, but it will yield powerful results. It is a simple way to find out what your story needs to be about. Find that thing that your character would rather die than do and make them do it.

Here is an exercise. Write down the personal hell for the characters provided below.

There is no right answer, just make sure the characters go to that place, or does that thing they would least like.

**Example:** A rich man wants nothing more than to acquire more money.

**PERSONAL HELL:** He finds himself penniless.

**Example:** A girl wants to runaway from home.

**PERSONAL HELL:** She gets her wish and wants nothing more than to get home.

**Your turn:**

CHARACTER: A vain woman cares about nothing but her looks.

PERSONAL HELL: \_\_\_\_\_

CHARACTER: A woman who hates people and wants to spend all of her time alone.

PERSONAL HELL: \_\_\_\_\_

Character: A man wants fame more than anything.

PERSONAL HELL: \_\_\_\_\_

CHARACTER: A man won't let go of the past and move on with his life.

PERSONAL HELL: \_\_\_\_\_

CHARACTER: A man has spent his life as an assassin.

PERSONAL HELL: \_\_\_\_\_

CHARACTER: A woman is so into cleanliness that she won't even let people into her home.

PERSONAL HELL: \_\_\_\_\_

CHARACTER: A man who is a lying womanizer.

PERSONAL HELL: \_\_\_\_\_

CHARACTER: A woman who dates only very wealthy men.

PERSONAL HELL: \_\_\_\_\_

CHARACTER: A man wants to spend his life traveling the world.

PERSONAL HELL: \_\_\_\_\_

CHARACTER: An honest cop.

PERSONAL HELL: \_\_\_\_\_

CHARACTER: An inventor believes his technology to be infallible.

PERSONAL HELL: \_\_\_\_\_

CHARACTER: A spoiled child.

PERSONAL HELL: \_\_\_\_\_

## THE CRUCIFIXION

*“What we do for ourselves dies with us. What we do for others is immortal.”*

— Albert Pike

Sacrifice is an important part of what makes a protagonist a hero. Few of us have much respect for someone who has had things too easily. We admire struggle and sacrifice.

I remember hearing a story about a man in a Nazi death camp who volunteered to take the place of another man who was slated to be killed. The first man had a family and begged the Nazis to spare him. The second man had no family and so sacrificed himself for the first man and his family. Few of us would do such a thing, though we all wish we would. That’s what makes a hero—someone who puts the needs of others before his own.

George Bailey, in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, spends his entire life sacrificing for others. We see him as a heroic figure because of that self-sacrifice.

You might think that this is visible ink, but readers and audiences are unaware of its use when it is applied skillfully.

Look at the story of the crucifixion. Jesus is suffering on the cross. It's important that *this* aspect of the story be relayed to us. Remember that this is the Son of God, here; he can work miracles. So we might very well wonder if he suffered at all up there. His crown of thorns, his having to carry his own cross, his stab wound, are all necessary details of the narrative.

Jesus even says, "Father, why have you forsaken me?" It is important for us to know that he was not, through some miracle, spared the pain of the crucifixion. The story's power lies in the idea that he suffered just as you or I would have.

And then, of course, what happens to Jesus? He rises from the grave. He ascends to heaven. He is rewarded for his pain.

According to Norse mythology, the king of the gods, Odin, gave up one of his eyes and was speared to a tree for nine days in order to gain wisdom. Attaining wisdom is never easy.

In *Huck Finn*, Huck isn't sure if he should turn in Jim, the runaway slave. His world tells him it is a sin not to do so. But Huck has come to know and care for Jim and to see him as a human being.

At the end of the book, Huck decides that he'd rather sin than turn in his friend.

"I'll go to hell then," he says. He believes he will be punished forever for helping his

friend. This is a pretty big sacrifice.

We even respect small sacrifices. One of my best friends is always willing to admit when he's wrong. He owns up to it quicker than anyone I've ever met. Not just with small things, either. How many of us are so willing to admit our mistakes and shortcomings? I'm not saying that my friend is a hero, but there is a certain amount of courage involved in being the type of person that he is. He leaves himself vulnerable emotionally, and emotional pain can be just as damaging as physical pain, sometimes more.

In *Terminator 2*, the robot from the future sacrifices himself for the good of humanity. This once murderous machine is now a hero.

All characters of change have, at least, an emotional death that allows them to be resurrected anew.

Apply enough pressure and heat to change a lump of coal into a diamond.

## FROM BUTTERFLY TO CATERPILLAR

*“If once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny.”*

—Yoda, *The Empire Strikes Back*

Characters don't always change for the better. Some stories are about how people are corrupted—how angels fall.

In *The Godfather*, Michael Corleone starts off as a virtuous man, a war hero, no less.

When he tells his fiancée, Kay, about his family's criminal behavior, he tells her, “That's my family, Kay, not me.” He is above all of this.

What is the ritual pain that begins his change? His father is shot. Michael may not approve of his family's business, but he does care for them.

His change is slow at first. First, he protects his father while the men who shot him try to finish him off. As an audience we can understand that. Who wouldn't protect someone they love from killers.

Then Michael decides he wants to kill the men who shot his father. When he does kill them, it is not justice, it is revenge. Michael's father was not killed, only wounded.

That might not make much difference in some story realities, but it does in this one. We know that because in the opening scene Michael's own father tells us so. He defines the difference between justice and revenge when a man comes to him asking him to kill the two men who nearly raped his daughter.

BONASERA

What do you want of me? I'll give you anything  
you want, but do what I ask!

DON CORLEONE

And what is that Bonasera?

BONASERA whispers into the DON's ear.

DON CORLEONE

No. You ask for too much.

BONASERA

I ask for Justice.

DON CORLEONE

The Court gave you justice.

BONASERA

An eye for an eye!

DON CORLEONE

But your daughter is still alive.

So as an audience we know when Michael has crossed onto the “dark path.” And we have seen how someone can be seduced into this world. The angel has fallen.

Because the scene with Don Corleone and Bonasera is the first scene in the film, it becomes invisible ink. The audience has no idea that this scene will help them understand the rest of the film. Like all forms of invisible ink, it works on a subconscious level.

## **FLIP-FLOPS**

When I say flip-flops I don't mean shoes. Flip-flops is the name that I give characters who are opposites, but exchange character traits.

Oscar and Felix of Neil Simon's play *The Odd Couple*, are probably the most famous flip-flops. One is clean and prissy while the other is sloppy and gruff. Their marriages have broken up and they are thrown together as roommates. They are extreme opposites, which offers the best opportunity for conflict and, therefore, comedy. Their ritual pain is having to live with one another.

By the end of the story we have seen why both of their marriages failed. This pairing is a replay, or a clone, of each of their marriages. But it has also changed both characters. Both are a little more aware of their respective faults. They could each stand to be a little bit like the other.

In fact, the last messy thing Oscar does is tell his poker guests to watch their cigarette ashes. He says, "This is my house, not a pig sty." This is a huge change from the Oscar at the opening of the play.

Another classic example is *The African Queen*. In that film, Humphrey Bogart plays a

crusty, hard-drinking boat captain, while Katharine Hepburn plays his flip-flop. She is a stuffy religious matron who detests vulgar vices such as demon rum. These two share little in common except the small boat they are trapped on together.

Through the ritual pain of having to make their way down a treacherous river together, they both become fuller people. Each has something the other is lacking, and by exchanging traits they become whole.

Sometimes only one of the characters needs to change and the other is the catalyst for that change, such as in *Beauty and the Beast*. When the Beast changes enough on the inside to earn the love of a woman, he changes on the outside from a beast to a handsome man. The change is only an external manifestation of what is going on internally.

*Shrek* turns this idea on its green funnel-shaped ear, but it is still the same story. Shrek is completely comfortable with who he is; it is the Princess who must change.

## CHARACTERS WHO DON'T CHANGE

Do characters always need to change? No, they don't. But you always have to remember what your armature is and why you are telling the story. Let that make the decision for you. What is the best way to dramatize your point?

This is not exactly the story of an individual who doesn't change, but it illustrates my point quite well, I think.

When I was a kid, I learned a lot about story structure by watching old reruns of Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone*. There is one episode called "It's a Good Life." In it, an evil five-year-old boy, who has the power to read minds and do just about anything else, has the small farm town of Peaksville, Ohio, held captive. For all intents and purposes, the rest of the world has ceased to exist.

The few people left in the town walk on eggshells so as not to suffer the boy's wrath. They are all miserable, but they try only to say good things and think good thoughts. The boy might hear their bad thoughts, were they to have them, and kill them in some cruel fashion, like catching them on fire, or worse. He even kills a couple of "clone" animals so that we, the audience, get an idea of his power. Even the boy's parents live in fear.

One night, there is a birthday gathering for one of the town's folk at the house of the boy. The guest of honor receives a few gifts from what can be scrounged up by his friends. The town is running low on food and other provisions and luxuries, but the boy neglects to replenish them.

The boy likes music, but hates singing, and one of the gifts received by the man having the birthday is a record of his favorite singer. He wants desperately to play it, but the others warn against it. Upset, he starts in on another gift, a bottle of rye whiskey. He gets drunk and starts to complain out loud for all to hear.

The other adults are in a panic—they try to distract the boy and calm the man down, but he's having none of it. Surprisingly, the boy ignores the man's drunken rant. But the man just gets louder and more obnoxious. (We, the audience, know something bad will happen, but the storytellers drag this scene out an agonizingly long time. They understood that promising conflict was a powerful form of invisible ink.)

Finally, in a final act of defiance, the man tries to get his fellow captives to join him in a rousing chorus of "Happy Birthday." The boy loses his patience and glowers at the man.

The man's song is directed right at the boy and it becomes clear that this is a kind of suicide. When it is clear that all the boy's attention is on him, the man tries to get someone to come up behind the boy and kill him. He begs them to take the risk. Sure, they might be killed, but if they were to succeed all of this misery would be over.

The people do nothing. The boy kills the man in a rather grotesque manner.

With that, the boy's father notices that his son is making it snow outside. He loses his temper because the snow will ruin the crops. He begins to yell at the boy, but catches himself and tells the boy that it's good that he's making it snow.

The end.

This story is more about a situation that remains the same rather than one character, but you get the idea.

What is the armature of this story, do you think? It tells us that no one has any power over us that we don't give to him or her. It is better to challenge oppression and die than to live under its thumb. Ghandi brought down the British Empire by simply not acknowledging their power in his country. That's it.

The drunken man in this piece becomes the hero. He made a sacrifice hoping that it would help those left behind. The others are seen as cowards.

So, how did the storytellers get away with not changing things? For one thing, it was the best way to make the point. And for another, we saw where things could have changed, but didn't. If only they had stood up to the boy—to their oppressor. The fork in the road

that let the audience know what could happen is a kind of invisible ink.

The ending with the snow is important because we see that things are going to continue to be the same—“and ever since that day.”

