

THE PLOT THICKENS

by Jenna Kernan

Part I – The Setup

The Inciting Incident

Screenwriter's have an interesting perspective on plot. Robert McKee, famous for his STORY seminar, divides a plot into five distinct parts: the Inciting Incident, Progressive Complications, Crisis, Climax and Resolution. Screenwriting guru Michael Hague prefers six parts, which he calls: Opportunity, Change of Plans, Point of No Return, Major Setback and Climax.

This article will explore a story's opening in greater detail. This includes the time just prior to change and the change itself.

Most stories do include a setup, also called the Introduction of Characters or the Ordinary World. Screenwriters do not consider the setup a story event. Rather they hold that anything before the Inciting Incident is introduction. This introduction is a vital, but should be kept as short as possible. The type of story you are telling helps determines the length and type of set up needed.

One consideration is whether the writer needs to develop empathy for the protagonist before the Inciting Incident/Opportunity, which marks the moment when the protagonist's life is changed. If the plot is complicated or has many characters, the introduction will generally be longer.

Most tales begin with your protagonist's ordinary world. Remember that ordinary does not mean boring. One of the responsibilities of the setup is to intrigue the audience. Ordinary is a relative word. Life as a prizefighter is very different from life for a hostage negotiator and both can be extremely interesting.

Although the setup is not an event, the writer has much to accomplish in a relatively short time. Beyond making the opening captivating, the writer must select the vital details the audience must have to understand the story. A common error is to cram too much of a character's backstory into the opening. Backstory, by definition is stuff that happens before the story. Don't put it in the setup. Hint at it, intrigue the reader by raising questions and later weave in interesting bits and pieces throughout the story.

Who would you rather sit next to on an airplane, a man who tells you every blasted minute detail of his life or a guy who presents a mystery, a paradox and an intriguing puzzle? I chose the mystery man. Readers want characters who outwardly appear to be one thing, but inside are another.

Another objective of the setup is to show the protagonist's personality, his loves and hates, his relationships (if they are important to the story) and the world your character

inhabits. The writer needs to do all that, while presenting the protagonists in situation that causes the audience to identify with them.

How do you do that? Hague lists five tried and true ways to get audiences to identify with your protagonist. Make your protagonists sympathetic, threatened, likable, funny and/or powerful. McKee points out that by making the protagonist likable, or at least more likable than the characters surrounding him, you are creating a character like the audience. In effect, the writer creates the conditions that allow the audience to root for themselves.

One of the most obvious reasons to begin with the protagonist's life prior to the Inciting Incident is so that when this story event occurs, the audience feels they know the protagonist, her world and already identifies completely with her.

The Inciting Incident is the first major event of your story. It is the call to adventure, the catalyst that forces the protagonist into action, the occurrence that shakes the protagonist out of their ordinary world and into the story. Michael Hague calls this story event The Opportunity because it 'creates a new, visible desire' in the protagonist and begins the journey. This event may happen to others as well but it resonates with the protagonist in such a way that he or she must act. For example, many other characters in the movie Jaws know about the shark attack, but the mayor and coroner do not act. It is only the chief of police, Brody, who develops a visible desire based on the inciting incident. The visible desire created by the inciting incident brings the protagonist to action. This is a change from their ordinary world and launches the protagonist in a new direction.

Let's turn to some examples in the movies. Note the setup, method of building identification, inciting incident and visible desire raised by the incident.

PRETTY WOMAN: (Romantic Comedy)

Setup – This story begins with the protagonist, Vivian, discovering her roommate has stolen the rent money for drugs and the landlord is at the door. She needs rent money quick. We feel for this woman who is placed in such an unfair position through no fault of her own. The audience then immediately switches to the Edward who is leaving a party, thrown in his honor by his closest friend, celebrating a deal he closed. This establishes his success, his power, his wealth and hints that something important is missing from his life.

Method of Building Identification – Edward is rich and powerful. Vivian suffers undeserved misfortune (sympathetic and threatened) and she is funny.

Inciting Incident – Edward gets lost and stops to ask a prostitute for directions.

Visible Desire – Get Edward interested in more than directions and earn the rent money.

LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL: (Drama)

Setup – This movie has a much longer than usual Setup build up so that when the Nazi's march in and take the protagonist to the concentration camp the audience is thoroughly in love with him and his family and feel completely for them. This

makes their struggle much more heart-rending. If the writers had begun with the deportation, we would not have felt the horror of this situation so acutely. The sometimes writers spent a long time in the Setup to build empathy toward the protagonist's plight.

Method of Building Identification – protagonist is likable, funny and threatened.

Inciting Incident - Deportation by Nazi forces.

Visible Desire – Survival of self and family.

JAWS (Thriller)

Inciting Incident (Part 1) The movie Jaws opens with the first half of an inciting incident, rather than using a traditional set up. Some inciting incidents are broken into two. This is very common in mysteries and thrillers. Part one is the murder and part two is the discovery of the body. Jaws is an example of this type of opening. The first scene is a young girl being viciously attacked and killed by a shark. This is juxtaposed against the character's ordinary world for contrast and to have a gripping opening. When the ordinary world does appear, the audience enjoys the anticipation of knowing what Brody does not. Oh, sure everything seems normal, but just wait until they find that body.

Setup – The next scene is the ordinary world of the protagonist. The contrast between the attack and the normalcy hints at the distance this protagonist will have to go to fight this opponent. The scene shows the protagonist, introducing his family and his job, as chief of police on an island tourist town. Nearly immediately, he receives a phone call about a missing person (we know where she is) that launches the hero toward the second part of the Inciting Incident.

Method of Building Identification – Brody is likable (family man), empathetic (overworked chief trying to make a good impression in his new job) and threatened (because we know about the shark, though he does not).

Inciting Incident (Part 2)– The chief is interviewing a young man about the missing persons report when a whistle blast (inciting incident, part 2) announces the discovery of the body on the beach. This discovery points the protagonist toward learning what the audience already knows. There is one hell of a big, hungry shark circling his island. By the time he discovers the body, we already like the protagonist who is a conscientious fish out of water (Bronx boy in New England and non-swimmer). The writers have cleverly build empathy and stacked the deck in favor of the shark.

Visible Desire – Kill the shark

MY COUSIN VINNY

Setup – This screenplay does not open with the hero's ordinary world but by setting up two secondary characters. We see two boys from New York City driving through the Deep South. This might seem the wrong move, since these are not the characters with which the writers want the viewer to bond. True, these events do

not happen to the protagonist (Vinny), but they are the events that launch the hero in a new direction.

Method of Building Identification – The boys are likable, very funny, smart (college students), sympathetic (fish out of water) and threatened (wrongly accused of murder). We can imagine the horror of being arrested and tried in a kangaroo court for a crime we didn't commit. The screenwriters have earned our sympathy.

Inciting Incident – Vinny's cousins are wrongly arrested for murder after accidentally stealing a can of tuna fish.

Visible Desire – Help his cousin by proving the boys' innocence.

ROMANCING THE STONE

Setup – This tale opens with Joan Wilder weeping at her keyboard as she completes a gripping romance manuscript and celebrates alone with her cat showing us that she has no one with which to celebrate this milestone. She is presented as a romantic, absentminded, introverted homebody, with a frig full of medications. The screenwriters also do a nice job foreshadowing the upcoming incident by telling us that her sister is in Columbia and that her sister's husband has just been murdered. A mysterious envelope arrives at Joan's door and a suspicious stranger kills the building super before ransacking her place.

Method of Building Identification – Jane is likable (hopeless romantic), sympathetic (afraid to fly) and is being threatened (by the menacing stranger who is after the envelope).

Inciting Incident – Joan gets a desperate call from her sister telling her she's been kidnapped and will be returned only if Joan brings the treasure map inside the envelope to Columbia (not the river).

Visible Desire – Rescue her sister.

Though many stories begin in the setup, they stay there only as long as it necessary to set up the story and orient the audience. Not all stories begin with the setup, opting to leap in at the inciting incident for a big splash. The drawback of this technique is that the audience cannot appreciate the magnitude of the change wrought by the Inciting Incident because they don't know what is normal and do not know the protagonist. The Inciting Incident needs to be brought on as soon as possible. When there is a great need to build sympathy for the protagonist (*Life is Beautiful*) or to introduce a complicated plot the setup may be longer. An example of a complicated plot with multiple characters is *Pirates of the Caribbean, Search for the Black Pearl*. This story opens with one of the protagonists seeing the Pearl and acquiring a very important Aztec gold coin. The scene then flashes to her as an adult, rediscovering the coin and putting it around her neck. We then meet another protagonist delivering a sword and discover that he is the boy who escaped the pirate ship and the rightful owner of the coin. Next, we meet another protagonist, Jack Sparrow, a pirate captain in search of a new vessel. The next scene returns to the female protagonist who faints and falls into the sea before Jack's eyes. The Inciting Incident is the coin touching the ocean. It causes a shock wave that changes the

winds and precipitating her rescue by the captain. It also summons the Black Pearl and her supernatural crew, effectively launching the story.

If the situation is universally understood (ex. A girl being eaten by a shark, a murder, an abduction/kidnapping). The introduction of characters in their ordinary world is often sandwiched between the two parts of the Inciting Incident or follows it.

The Inciting Incident is the story event that forever changes the course of the protagonist's life. It is not a cute meet that has no bearing on the rest of the tale. It can happen by chance (discovery of a body, JAWS, envelope at the door, ROMANCING THE SONE, wrongful arrest, MY COUSIN VINNY) or by choice (pulling your fancy sports car to the curb in a shady neighborhood to ask a hooker for directions, PRETTY WOMAN).

A great opening will hints at the story question and sets up the inevitable crisis. It does not occur off screen or before the story begins, but is a fully developed dramatic event that causes the protagonist to act in an effort to restore the balance upset by the Inciting Incident, while raising curiosity in the audience as to how this will work out. This event is the catalyst that causes our protagonist to want something, or want to avoid something, badly enough to act to achieve this new goal. This action leads us to the subject of the next in this series of three articles...*Progressive Complications*.

About the Author: Jenna Kernan has plotted four western historicals for Harlequin. Her latest, HIGH PLAINS BRIDE releases in May 2007. Look for her first Christmas novella this fall. For excerpts or to read more about Jenna, visit her at www.jennakernan.com