

THE PLOT THICKENS

by Jenna Kernan

Part II – Progressive Complications

In my last article, I took a look at the story setup and inciting incident from a screenwriter's perspective. This article will continue with the next element in a screenplay, including a series of escalating conflicts, small triumphs and crushing setbacks known to screenwriters at progressive complications. These obstacles comprise Act II and include between two and four turning points, depending on how you choose to count them.

Develop Your Controlling Idea

All stories begin with an idea. Some stories come from a simple “What if...” question. What if a man was bitten by a radioactive spider and developed super spider powers? (SPIDERMAN). What if a two fed up parents hired a woman to get their son to move out of their house? (FAILURE TO LAUNCH). What if a German factory owner creates a list of Jewish employees vital to the war effort and thereby saves them from the holocaust? (SCHINDLER'S LIST). What if a woman, trying to reconcile family differences between her fiancé and his brother, ends up falling in love with her fiancé's brother? (MOONSTRUCK).

Exploring an idea is an excellent place to begin constructing a story. The best way is for the writer to choose a topic that intrigues and that has no obvious right or wrong answer. In order to explore the subject, writers must be impartial and present both sides. No audience wants to be subjected to a two-hour sermon, although AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH did do well at the box office, so maybe I'm wrong. Still, in fiction, it is best to avoid soapboxes. When exploring a **controlling idea**, screenwriters include what happens and also why it happens. This demonstration of truth shows the audience why the story ended the way it did. For example, A servant boy fall in love with a princess and earns happiness because he are willing to face insurmountable odds, including death, to be win her (A PRINCESS BRIDE). The legal system cannot deliver justice because it moves on technicalities and the cleverness of unethical attorneys (...AND JUSTICE FOR ALL). There is reason to be hopeful even in the worst of circumstances because there is still good in the world (ANNE FRANK: THE WHOLE STORY). One person can change the world because she has the courage to act (NORMA RAE).

Finding Your Story Question

After the Inciting Incident and New Situation, the protagonist must commit to something. She either wants something or wants to avoid something. This ‘something’ becomes the story question. Audiences recognize instinctively that when they get the answer to this question, the movie is over. The **story question** evolves out of the inciting incident and new situation. It is a visible, tangible desire, not something ethereal like world peace, enlightenment or self-actualization. The question defines the story's course and creates a clearly finish line. Commitment to this goal is the first turning point. It changes the direction of the character's path from ordinary world into a new situation with a new tangible goal. In movies this change usually involves a change of location.

Here are some examples of story questions.

JAWS

Question: Is Brody going to kill this shark or what?

MY COUSIN VINNY

Question: Will Vinny successfully defend his cousins against a false murder rap?

PRETTY WOMAN

Question: Will Edward discard Vivian after their week-long contract is over?

TITANIC

Question: Will Rose escape her stifling lifestyle and family obligations and earn her freedom?

LORD OF THE RINGS

Question: Will Frodo destroy the ring?

FINDING NEMO

Question: Will Norman find his son?

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Question: Will Belle break the spell cast on the Beast?

THE PATRIOT

Question: Will 'The Ghost' succeed in defeating British Forces?

The Struggle to Reach the Goal

Complications should escalate logically, with the simplest coming first. This actually applies to two different issues.

1. Any reasonable person, when pursuing a goal will, quite naturally, take the most conservative steps first. For example, when the protagonist, Mitch, hears that THE FIRM he works for is run by the Mob, he doesn't agree to work with the Feds or flee the country. His first step is to seek a private detective to learn if it is true.

2. The suggestion 'simplest first' can also apply to pacing. The plot fizzles and pacing slows if story conflicts do not escalate. In the film LEGALLY BLONDE, the challenges intensify in logical order. To win back her boyfriend, the protagonist must get into law school, survive being humiliated by a tough professor, embarrassed by the nasty preppy girls at a Halloween gathering that turns out not to be the costume party, exclusion from joining a study group, and so on. Challenges mount, she has some successes and some failures. Complications are progressive. The protagonist's troubles continue until her mentor makes a pass at her, expecting sexual favors

in exchange for helping her with her career. Notice the screenwriters did not have the professor proposition her and next have another professor make fun of her in class. That would be anticlimactic. The progression is logical and mounts. This pattern repeats over and over in story and in film.

It is only as the protagonist's situation becomes grave that she becomes more desperate. As complications grow in magnitude, actions generate greater and greater risk.

A recent comedy called *CHRISTMAS WITH THE KRANKS* features two empty-nesters who decided to skip Christmas and go on a dream vacation. The plan causes increasingly bizarre behavior as peer pressure mounts for them to engage in the socially acceptable community activity and crescendos when their daughter decides last minute to bring her new boyfriend to the family Christmas. This is a funny example of two characters becoming increasingly desperate. The movie also does a nice job in spinning the story off in a new unexpected direction when their daughter calls home and throws a monkey wrench into their plans for fun in the sun. This is the final turning point that changes the protagonists' goal, from going on vacation, to hosting Christmas for their only child. Another comedy that shows two characters spinning dangerously out of control and that is a great example of characters growing increasingly desperate is *THE OUT OF TOWNERS* starring Jack Lemmon. Rent it and look for the scene, where Lemmon, trying to retrieve his wallet, mugs a man he wrongly thinks took it. He ends up assaulting an innocent, very young Sylvester Stallone. Very funny stuff and a beautiful example of escalating conflict, causing characters to grow desperate and so take actions they never would have dreamed possible at the story's start.

In movies, a protagonist's best efforts often backfire. Not all attempts are successful. When John Dumbard, *DANCES WITH A WOLF*, tries to alert the Sioux tribe of the arrival of a large herd of buffalo, he accidentally interrupts a religious ceremony and nearly gets himself killed.

Mistakes are equally costly. When Peter Parker, *SPIDERMAN*, tries to get a little justice from a boss who cheated him, he lets the man, he witnesses robbing his boss, get away. The robber then shoots Peter's beloved uncle in order to use his car to get away.

Screenwriters often have attempts by the character to move forward actually make matters worse. This increases the tension and pacing, makes the character more desperate and allows the audience to root for the underdog. Audiences do not want the protagonists to have an easy ride. They want the hero to have to earn his victory.

In other words, your protagonist gains nothing without a struggle. There are no free lunches or easy wins, no coincidental blessings. If your character wants something she has to fight for it and she will not always win. Often her struggle to achieve her goal will backfire putting her in a worse position than she was in before she took action. This is the gap between what the character desires and what they get.

Exploring Levels of Conflict

Story conflict can occur on three level: with self, with another, with society. Let's look at them in more detail.

The most basic conflict is one in which the protagonist is in **conflict with one's self**. Everyone is occasionally of two minds. This conflict may be the basis of a story or a dimension of it. The first movie that came to my mind when thinking of an example of conflict with self is the film classic, LOST WEEKEND, which involves a man's struggle with alcoholism. This is a full out war with himself. A more recent version on the same theme would be Nicholas Cage in LEAVING LAS VEGAS. Both movies also involve a conflict with a caring girlfriend, but the primary focus is the battle within.

A second level of conflict is when a character is in **conflict with another person**. This is the meat of any romance novel. In FIRST 50 DATES, the protagonist is in conflict with the heroine who he loves and is trying to woo, but who, unfortunately, has the attention span of a fruit fly as the result of a brain injury, making it impossible for her to recall that she loves him, too.

The third level of conflict is where the protagonist is set into **conflict with society** at large. Action adventure stories operate mainly at this level. NATIONAL TREASURE is a good example of a protagonist in conflict with society. He is battling the National Archives unwillingness to believe his crackpot theory that the Bill of Rights is in jeopardy because it has a treasure map on the back. He is also in conflict with the 'Feds' who are chasing him after he steals the document to protect it from the nefarious bad guy and, of course, he is in conflict with the grave-robbing villains. Each of Cages' three opponents represents some facet of society (conservators/preservationists, the Federal government, greedy black marketers).

The most engaging stories operate at all three levels simultaneously. The movie THE DEPARTED manages this. One of the two protagonists, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, is an undercover cop in conflict with himself because his family's connections with the mob. He is torn between honesty and corruption and battles with his morality throughout the movie right up to his last scene when he struggles to bring in a corrupt cop instead of shooting him. He is simultaneously in conflict with his superiors, who have placed him undercover, and the mob kingpin, played by Jack Nicholson, who might discover that he is an undercover cop and kill him. Finally, he is at war with society at large, specifically the system that allows mobsters to buy judges, cops and even the federal agents.

Turning Points vs. Complications

Complications include turning points, but it should be said that not all complications are turning points. Generally, there are two major turning points in a movie and many complications. Some screenwriters count as many as four turning points. The difference between turning points and complication is their placement and the result or aftermath. If you do not count the Opportunity/Inciting Incident as a turning point (may do), then the first turning point comes at the end of act one and proposes the story question. It also spins the story in a new direction, creating the new situation (often a new setting as well) for the opening of Act II.

Here are four examples of turning points vs. complications.

JAWS (Thriller, Happy Ending)

First Turning Point – Brody's child is threatened by the shark, bringing the problem to his doorstep. This launches Brody in a new direction. He now wants to kill the shark personally and is willing to leave land (new location) to do it.

Story Question Proposed – Will Brody kill the shark or will the shark kill Brody?

Complication – Quinn breaks the boat's radio, cutting off communication with shore. Though this is a setback and a complication for Brody, it does not spin the movie in a different direction or change the location. This occurs midway through the movie and is not a major turning point.

MY COUSIN VINNY (Comedy, Happy Ending)

First Turning Point – Vinny accepts the case and arrives in Alabama.

Story Question Proposed – Will he win this case?

Complication – About half way through the movie and in the midst of a series of complications, Vinny's clean suit falls in the mud. He now has no clothing for court and the judge has made it clear that if he ventures again into court dressed inappropriately, he will be held in contempt. This is a complication. It increases tension, cause difficulties for Vinny, but does not spin the story in a new direction.

THE DEPARTED (Drama, Tragic Ending)

I really loved this movie, but have only seen it once, so here is a disclaimer. I might not have this one quite right.

First Turning Point – Both Matt Damon's character (a career criminal who has infiltrated the police and is now a detective) and Leonardo DiCaprio's character (undercover cop who has infiltrated the Irish Mob in Boston) learn of each other's existence, triggering a new situation. Both men must discover the other's identity before they are discovered.

Story Question Proposed – Who will be discovered first?

Complication – Jack Nicholson's character (Mob Kingpin) shows DiCaprio the severed hand of a snitch. This is about midway through the picture. It causes DiCaprio to ditch his wire but does not significantly turn the story in a new direction. It does serve to scare the daylights out of DiCaprio, escalates his risk and increases the audience's concern over his welfare.

A story needs complications as well as turning points in order to keep up the pacing. Complications multiply the protagonist's woes and add to his desperation. In movies, turning points are strategically placed and spin the story in a new direction. The final turning point is

