

THE PLOT THICKENS

by Jenna Kernan

Part III - Crisis, Climax Resolution

In my last two articles, I looked at a screenwriter's perspective on story, including the setup, inciting incident in Part I and continuing with a series of escalating conflicts known to screenwriters as progressive complications in Part II. In this final article, I turn to the crisis, climax and resolution as seen in films. These terms, now common screenwriters' jargon, come from the book *STORY* written by screenwriting teacher, Robert McKee.

So, you are watching a movie that has you on the edge of your seat because the story has reached the **CRISIS**. This is also called the Big Black Moment by writers and referred to as the Major Setback by Michael Hauge. This marks the end of Act II and comes at approximately three-quarters of the way through most films.

The **Crisis** is the final turning point when the hero is faced with the most difficult of situations, the most taxing of decisions or full-out failure. We are accustomed to regarding this as the very darkest of times, but this is not always the case, as we will see.

The Crisis forces the hero to again make a choice under pressure. The results are usually surprising and, just like the first turning point (Inciting Incident), the Crisis hurdles the story off in a new direction, changing the film's course.

In most instances, the Crisis is a very bad moment for the protagonist, when the worst possible thing does indeed happen. This comes in sharp contrast to the approaching Climax. The Crisis is a very bad moment and the Climax is the happy ending that is the most common final scene in movies and books. However not all endings are happy. In a tragedy, the Crisis is the upbeat moment, the glimpse of what might be—the false hope that all might be well, before the crushing defeat happens. Some endings are both good and bad. In this case, the Crisis and Climax moment can be up, down or mixed.

The **Climax** is not a turning point but the result of the action taken by the protagonist in reaction to the Crisis. This is where the story question, posed back at the inciting incident, is finally answered in a satisfying, but unexpected way. Stories that end exactly as expected can fall flat. Audiences prefer an ending that is both satisfying and unforeseen.

The final scene in a film is the **Resolution**. Here is where we see the protagonist has restored the balance in her life. Some stories come full circle, others end in a new place, but all express the controlling idea discussed in the second article. In the resolution, screenwriters include *how* the story ends and *why* it ended the way it did. For instance, *HARRY POTTER AND THE SOCERERS STONE* ends by coming full circle. The story begins with Harry leaving Privet Drive for Hogwards. In the Resolution portion of the movie, Harry recovers in the hospital

surrounded by his friends and overseen by the headmaster. The scene is kept short. Then another short scene shows the school celebrating/acknowledging the victory of Harry and his friends. Their success wins Gryffindor the house cup. And the final scene shows Harry coming full circle, as he returns to Privet Drive, but instead of being miserable, as he was in the beginning, he is now happy because he knows he is a wizard, who has wonderful loyal friends and that, though he is not allowed to do magic outside of school, the Dursleys do not know this, swinging the balance of power to him for the first time in his life.

The resolution scenes in film are the payoff for the audience who have seen the protagonist change under pressure because of what they have learned from their journey and now watches the protagonist reap their just rewards. In the case of tragedies, the protagonist, who failed to grow and change, is punished. The third possibility is for a movie to have a mixed ending, neither happy, nor sad, but a mixture of both. The resolution also expresses the controlling idea. Once this is done, the screenwriter does not linger but rolls the credits. This final portion of film generally occupies about ten percent of the total time and is a transition, easing the audience away from the protagonist by showing that all is well or at least resolved to a satisfying conclusion, allowing the audience to leave the theater with a sense of contentment over the film's ending.

The screenwriters do not overstay their welcome. The resolution is kept as short as possible to achieve its purpose.

Let's take some examples of the Crisis, Climax and Resolutions in some films.

EXAMPLES OF MOVIES WITH HAPPY ENDINGS

MY COUSIN VINNY

Crisis: The prosecution introduces a surprise witness who clinches the case and all seems lost for Vinny and the two defendants. Vinny gains a short recess where he scrambles for something he has missed that might save the boys' lives' and in the process insults and alienates his girlfriend, Lisa. It now looks like he will lose the case, lose his love and the defendants will lose their lives. Black enough for you? And this is a comedy.

Climax: Vinny figures out that the photo that girlfriend, Lisa, took of the crime scene actually makes their case, but he needs Lisa help and the sheriff's help to prove he is right.

Resolution: Vinny wins the case because he was willing to ask for needed help. The boys are released. A friend in NY verifies Vinny's identity, getting the judge off his back. Lisa and Vinny drive off in triumph arguing about wedding plans. This resolution event is on the long side because of all the subplots that need to be tied up. The controlling idea is expressed by Lisa who reacts to Vinny's disappointment over not winning the case by himself, because he needed to ask for help. She points out to him that he will be a success because of his willingness to ask for help.

THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA

Crisis: Fashion assistant, Andrea Sachs, discovers she will be going to Paris for fashion week. This news comes while she is with her parents, who are visiting from out of town forcing her to leave them at the restaurant to jump to her bosses call. This trip causes her to hurt her coworker

badly as she takes her place, anger her old friends and also precipitates the breakup with her boyfriend as she chooses her career over them.

Climax: Andrea goes to Paris with her employer and discovers her dragon-lady boss crying as her latest marriage breaks up. This catalyst convinces Andrea that she does not want this job/life and she abandons her responsibilities and her boss to run home.

Resolution: Her boyfriend takes her back because she has made a choice about her priorities, putting their love first. Once Andrea makes her decision, the story moves quickly in the credits.

JAWS

Crisis: Hooper appears to be eaten by the shark. Brody sees Quinn eaten by the shark and, oh, yes, the boat is sinking and Brody can't swim. Yikes!

Climax: The shark chomps on a scuba tank that Brody throws into its mouth. On the next pass, Brody gets a shot at the tank with his high powered rifle turning Jaws into sushi.

Resolution: Hooper emerges from the deep where he has been hiding, providing an unexpected ending. The next shot shows the friends kicking toward shore on a makeshift raft. Spielberg does not overstay his welcome.

EXAMPLES OF A MOVIE WITH SAD ENDING

FINAL CUT

Crisis: Protagonist, Alan Hackman, learns that he has a chip in his brain that has recorded his entire life including the terrible death of a childhood acquaintance, an event that shaped his life. As a 'Cutter', he is not permitted to have such a chip because it would record all the footage of the lives he views and edits for clients' memorial services and so jeopardize their privacy. This discovery harkens the end of a career that he is very good at. It also provides him an opportunity to watch the horrible childhood memory as it actually happened.

Climax: The protagonist watches in agony as the recording of his darkest memory rolls. We see that the blood that covered the floor was actually paint and that his comrade did fall, but not to his death. Alan has a moment of joy and relief and seems willing to give up his career in exchange for this new peace of mind. He leaves the viewing happy for the first time in the film.

Resolution: His respite is brief, as the revelation that all his memories are recorded on the disk makes him a target for an extremist group desperate to find damaging material on his last client, whose memory chip Alan intentionally destroyed, and unintentionally recorded on his own chip. The very thing that brought him peace has also signaled his death.

EXAMPLES OF MOVIES WITH MIXED ENDINGS

THE NOTEBOOK

Crisis: This movie has a mixed climax to match its mixed ending. Noah has spent the entire film reading from a notebook, the story of his love affair with his wife, Allie, in an effort to make her recall, even for a few moments, their love. His efforts are rewarded and his wife, suffering from Alzheimer's disease, recalls everything. This is a joyful moment that is all too brief as her confusion returns and she ends up screaming for help to escape the stranger who is 'attacking'

Christmas novella, included in the anthology entitled WESTERN WINTER WONDERLAND, in October 2007. For excerpts or to read more about Jenna, visit her at www.jennakernan.com