Some Things You Should Know about Story

(Six, to Be Precise)

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**(1) Whose story is it?**

A dramatic work has only one central character. There may be secondary characters of equal importance to the overall narrative, but in the vast majority of literary accomplishments from *Dracula* to *Candide*, *Tootsie* to *Richard* *III,* *Madame Bovary* to *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, there is only one *central* character. This character’s motive—what he/she wants in terms of a goal or objective--drives the story. This motive is the engine, the seminal force of the action. *Action* is the operant word. Fluid and unrelenting, action should not be confused with *activity*, which is often casual and directionless. The central character’s determination to follow what is often an obsessive course propels the action. This energy connects us to the central character. This is the dominant skein in any *story* that commands our attention.

Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet;* this great love story is driven by Romeo, who makes all the major decisions as well as being the primary eponymous character. Juliet has a very important role, but if she were the central character, she’d still be standing on the balcony wondering where Romeo is. *Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo*? No doubt at all where Romeo is. He’s at the center of the story.

If you look at it as the central character’s story, it’ll keep you focused on that principle. You won’t succumb to the temptation to jump out of that character’s story and into another just because you’re bored or stuck. Writers often introduce other characters because they haven’t made those characters already on stage interesting enough, or given them a sufficiently inventive plot to engage and maintain an audience’s undivided attention.

1. **What is the story about?**

Imagine a *TV Guide* synopsis of *Hamlet*: “Gloomy Dane pursues his father’s assassin.” It sounds stupid but it’s important that you basically know the shape of the story you’re going to tell, or at least have a rough idea of its beginning, middle, and end. Hold these points loosely but firmly in your mind—allowing room for surprise, for yourself as well as the audience. You may alter your original devices along the way, and inspire ideas that were hitherto no more than shadows on your unconscious mind--but a sense of direction that isn’t completely prefigured can be very useful. It may keep you from getting lost. It also forces you to look at the story as a deliberate sequence of dramatic events--not just an uneventful state of being. Not one damn thing after another, but one damn thing *because* of another. Remember, this is drama, not just a group of people sitting around chatting about the price of corn futures. Something *happens*, and it has to happen dramatically in order to change the characters’ lives and keep the audience in a state of excited anticipation.

This leads to another question, under the same heading: why is this day different to all other days? It is this difference, this *dramatic* difference,that changes a desultory *state of being* into a real story. Let’s illustrate “state of being”: you come home and eat your supper and your mother says do your homework and you do your homework and you wish you could watch television but you can’t because it’s against the house rules, so you don’t do a very good job on your homework and you eat your supper which is just a boring sandwich and you go to bed. These activities are just a state of being, they are not yet a *dramatic* *sequence of events.*

Let’s invent a *dramatic sequence*: you come home to do your homework and you can’t do it. It’s too hard. You ignore your mother and turn on the TV set. The regular program is suddenly interrupted by a strange figure on the screen. He speaks directly to you; “Hi, there! Know that difficult question in your homework? What would you say if I gave you the answer—and we didn’t tell anyone where you got it? “

Bingo! Curtain up! Lights - Camera - Action! This day is now different than all other days. Something has utterly changed the status quo. Enter the plot—and it immediately thickens. The boy is morally conflicted. Is this honest? Is it fair? Will he be found out? Or does he even care, if it means he can play for his team next day and score the winning goal? You now have a workable dramatic sequence.

**3. (a) What is the Prize** (to be won) and **(b) the Price** (to be paid)?

In drama, there is always a prize--something to be won by the central character. Because there’s a prize to be won, there’s also a price to be paid--something to be lost. No gain without pain. In the play (and film) *Driving Miss Daisy*, Miss Daisy wins her African-American chauffeur (Hoke) as a loving friend--but loses her independence to infirmity and old age. The prize is often related to what the central character wants, but isn’t always the same thing. What happens in many plays is that the central character both loses what seems most valuable, but discovers something in the process that is even more valuable. Consider Nora in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. What does she want? She wants to protect her husband and keep her secret about the loan she had to tell a lie to get--and is now trying to make good on to the bank. The “prize” turns out to be freedom from her oppressive, stultifying marriage. The price is that she gives up her illusions about her husband and learns (we hope) to survive on her own. No mean feat in the repressive society of Ibsen’s 19th century Norway.

Freedom is the prize in many dramatic works—another is the discovery (by the central character) of something he/she could have known all along but for some reason didn’t. The emotional impact of this discovery is so powerful that nothing will ever be the same for the characters again. It creates the *denouement* of the story.

**(4) Why should we care?**

Of all the questions, this one yields the most significant examples. Again, Miss Daisy. Why do we care about this grumpy old Jewish lady? The main reason: you know in your heart that her dilemma will someday become your dilemma. We are all going to grow old; many of us are going to have to depend on other people when that happens. In drama, we care about people who seem, in spite of much evidence to the contrary, to be human. To have impulses that we can comprehend and even, sometimes inexplicably, excuse. Let’s take an extreme example--Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*. How can you have anything but loathing for somebody who eats human flesh? Yet we end up being drawn to Hannibal, just as FBI investigator (Clarice Starling) is. Well, we’ve all wanted to “consume” people metaphorically---either because we love them or because we hate them. Remember, Hannibal helps Agent Starling achieve her goal, and, when she is asked: “How can be sure Hannibal won’t come after you?” she replies: “Because he says the world is a better place with me in it.”

So we see that Hannibal, like Frankenstein, is a monster with a human feelings. Hamlet, self-obsessed and neurotically conflicted as he is, ultimately engages our empathy by his sheer determination to confirm the identity of his father’s murderer and exact revenge. He even overcomes our impatience with his inability to make a decision and his selfish indifference to poor Ophelia. He reminds us of ourselves in our darkest moments of emotional turmoil.

There was a boy at junior high school who remarked: “I don’t think Darth Vader is such a bad guy.” I asked him, “ How do you know that?” He said, “It’s that mask he wears. He’s covering who he really is. You know that something bad has happened to him.”

The most common response from students to “Why do you care?” is that it’s because their characters stand up for what they believe in. They not only believe something, even if what they believe isn’t necessarily right, they also stand up for it. They have the courage of their convictions and refuse to be talked out of something they believe is right.

1. **What is s the major dramatic question? (MDQ)**

In one sense, this reprises the second question, “What is this story about?” Will Hamlet avenge his father’s murder? Will Miss Daisy accept Hoke as her protector when she can no longer take care of herself? It also echoes the first question: “Whose story is it?” In *Driving Miss Daisy* you’ve got an elderly woman who’s scared of growing old and a black man who’s sorely in need of a weekly wage. They are in the South, where the writer himself was raised, so he knows about racial tension. Black people and white people are still separate, even if the law says they’re equal. The point is, this is the social construct the writer has to deal with in real terms. He can’t step outside that social arena. Miss Daisy can’t suddenly behave as if she’s shopping in the Outer Hebrides. She’s in a racially segregated neighborhood in Alabama.

The Major Dramatic Question functions best when it is kept in mind from the beginning because it keeps you planted in the basic concept of the story. The danger is always that we jump out of our chosen arena and lose focus on our original concept.

1. **Who are you?**

In other words: What do you, the writer, think, feel, and believe? What are *your* values? You can’t impose your values on characters who wouldn’t have them ,but you can present your values in the context of the whole. Chances are there’s a moral dilemma at the core of your story. What do you as the architect of this narrative bring to it—of yourself and your deepest convictions? What has made you sit down and write it in the first place? Take *Hamlet* for example. There are hundreds of theories about why Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, but it is a fact that a woman called Ophelia drowned herself in the River Avon very shortly before he wrote *Hamlet* and that his own son, who died when he was very young, was called Hamlet. Thus the world of the writer is in the play in a very significant way. What you, the writer, have seen and learned from your own life is going to affect everything you write.

It steers the writer towards what she/he wants the play to say, how she/he wants the audience to feel as they leave the theatre, and what questions she/he wants them to ask. So ask yourself: what would you like to happen that might change human history in some small but personal way? What angers you? What delights you? What frightens you? Who are you?

This question links back to the first one, “Whose story is it?” because the central character will be a vehicle, whether you know it or not, for ideas and convictions of your own. This is the ongoing pleasure and challenge of writing for performance. It’s a way to sing the song you were born to sing, to be seen for who you are. To be heard. To make the vital difference. Be brash, be bold—but don’t insert yourself so strongly into the consciousness of the audience that you interrupt the continuum of objectivity that is essentially what engrosses the spectator. This is a plea for virtuosity and power, the very thing that characterized Baroque Art—that it penetrated the intellect not via the mind but via the emotions. So don’t be afraid to thumb your nose at the crowd gawping open-mouthed from the bleachers below and take a wild leap into the void. It has been said by someone who kayaked over Niagara that after the terrifying roar of water that filled the ears as he approached the edge, there was a great silence as the torrent bore him down into the depths. That is the silence that holds us, rapt and transfixed.

As Yogi Berra said: *When you come to a fork in the road—take it.*