

# *INSIDE STORY: The Power of the Transformational Arc*

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## INTRODUCTION

*We are lonesome animals.  
We spend our life trying to be less lonesome.  
One of our ancient methods is to tell a story  
begging the listener to say  
– and to feel –  
'Yes, that's the way it is,  
or at least that's the way I feel it.  
You're not as alone as you thought.'*

JOHN STEINBECK

Over the years in my work as a script consultant, I've found that notes telling writers to "*write what's in your heart,*" "*add more depth,*" or "*find your authentic voice*" aren't especially useful. It's not that these problems don't exist; in fact, they are often the primary reason a story feels flat and is un-involving. But, achieving depth in any artistic endeavor isn't just a *thing* you do; it's the totality of the experience. It's the result of an "*in-depth*" process that grows with the story as opposed to something that is tagged on in the end as an afterthought.

No one questions a writer's need to have a strategy or technique for developing the physical, external plotline of a story (e.g., catching the killer, solving a crime, making it to the altar on time). Most serious writers study the basic elements of story structure and learn how to organize a film script, novel, or play in a manner that resembles the form and serves the dramatic function. However, when it comes to expressing inner values and establishing a personal perspective on a story, writers are often guided only by their instincts or intuition and a little luck.

Instinct and especially intuition are absolutely essential for getting to the more meaningful, authentic aspects of a story, but they can easily degenerate into random guesswork if they're all you have to rely on. The starting point for any artistic creation is *always* at the level of intuition because it's where new ideas are conceived. However, new ideas, even great ones, seldom rise to the level of consciousness fully formed. They often begin as a jumble of thoughts, impressions, feelings, and images that can be as confusing and contradictory as they are inspiring and compelling.

The method for getting to the emotional heart of a story is not a divine secret bestowed only on the anointed. All writers have a well of valuable feelings and insights; it's just a question of knowing how to tap into them. *Inside Story* offers techniques and methods to help writers identify and stay focused on the deeper thematic and emotional dimensions that are necessary to create a more natural or organic story structure.

### ***Crossing to the Borderland***

I have a problem with the notion that writers must suffer for their art. I do believe, however, that we have to *live* for it. Living, of course, includes suffering as well as disappointment, disillusionment, and rejection, but it also includes joy, enlightenment, and even contentment. Ultimately, every one of the stories we tell tells our *own* story. Though a story seldom reflects the direct autobiographical chronology of our lives, it *always* reflects what we know to be true. It has to; we don't *know* anything else.

A young client of mine recently completed a high-wire action thriller, but from what she shared of her background it was apparent that she had also turned the rage she felt toward her domineering father into a story about the heroic pursuit of independence. Of course, that was hardly her plan when she first sat down to write, but that's the power of the creative experience: It opens up the space for a new piece of our own truth to be revealed—to us.

The writing experience is often described as a journey because, although it may physically shackle us to our desks, it does fulfill the primary mandate of a

true journey: It takes us to someplace new. Even if we end up right back where we started—we will inevitably see where we are with new eyes.

*Inside Story* is intended to be a traveling companion on the storyteller's journey. It will help you explore and navigate the rugged, unpredictable, and often harsh landscape that lies in every writer's path. It will serve as a translator for the complex metaphorical language of story and will guide you to the outposts of your known world, helping capture in your stories a glimpse of the wild new thing that lies just beyond everything you thought you knew. This is the true destination of all stories. At their best they take us to the space that lies just outside what we know about ourselves and introduce us to a new piece of personal knowledge that enhances our connection to others, to nature, and to the divine. Most importantly, stories can transform our painful and even blissful life experiences into higher consciousness.

The place that lies between what we know and what we are coming to know about ourselves and others is sometimes referred to as the *borderland*. It is the place where new consciousness is beginning to dawn, the place where we emerge from darkness into light. A writer who relies entirely on intuition rarely makes it to the borderland because what comes from the unconscious will generally stay there *unless* it is confronted and examined. This is why so many films today lack cohesiveness, substance, and relevance even though they may have an interesting central idea. A story that never makes it to the place where new consciousness, illuminating insights, and fresh perspectives are birthed will merely recycle worn-out clichés that trivialize and marginalize the true heroic quest for wholeness.

This quest for wholeness, for connection to all the undiscovered parts of our true nature, which includes our relationship with nature itself, is the model around which this theory of the transformational arc is formed. It embraces the principle that *any* living thing that isn't growing and evolving can only be moving toward decay and death. That we are either moving toward life or away from it is the heart of the human drama. To stand up and fight through the conflicts, confrontations, and disappointments we all encounter is the heroic challenge. To run away, disregard, dismiss, or avoid these challenges isn't merely benign or cowardly, it's tragic. It destroys the opportunity to grow and evolve. Ultimately this path leads only to the death of hopes, dreams, ambition, love, and all forms of interconnectedness.

Furthermore, if stories themselves avoid this internal challenge, they aren't simply harmless or shallow: They are tragic as well. A story that lacks any real reflection of a character's inner struggle can only portray the human condition in an idealized state. This means that characters who are "good" were born good and characters who are "bad" or "evil" were born that way as well; neither have any capacity to grow and evolve. This communicates to the audience that virtues like courage, kindness, and compassion aren't choices, but birthrights. Likewise, for those characters aligned with dark forces, there is no way out nor any hope of redemption. If only an occasional film lacked this dimensionality, it probably wouldn't matter too much, but when stories that undervalue the complexity of human drama dominate film, television, and all other manner of popular fiction, they become the standard by which we inevitably see ourselves—and each other. This is not only tragic, but the implication of its dehumanizing influence on the culture is catastrophic. The only way around this fate is for modern storytellers to make the journey inward themselves and share with audiences what is discovered there.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, a Chinese general named Sun Tzu wrote a collection of essays on military strategy known as "The Art of War," in which he offers this sage advice:

*If you know the enemy and know yourself,  
you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.*

*If you know yourself but not the enemy,  
for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat.*

*If you know neither the enemy nor yourself,  
you will succumb in every battle...*

While the art of writing is certainly not an act of war (for most people) and a script is not your enemy (most of the time), Sun Tzu's wisdom in regard to successfully facing a great challenge is also the foundation for developing a winning strategy as a writer.

If you *know* your story and *know* yourself, your writing can't fail. This doesn't necessarily guarantee that film studios will have a bidding war over every script you write, but it does promise that something of great value will be achieved by the experience. However, if you know yourself and you don't express that knowledge in your story, your script will fail creatively—no matter

how much money a studio pays you. But most assuredly, if you refuse to look inward to know either yourself or your story, nothing of any value will ever come of your efforts—regardless of how “big” the film hits at the box office. Video store shelves are littered with the corpses of life-less, ineffectual films that no one remembers and no one ever really cared about because nothing of any emotional substance was ever invested in the story.

### *Invest in Yourself*

All literary theories arise principally through observation. As far back as the time of ancient Greece, Aristotle observed that *drama imitates life* (he called this *mimesis*). Even if a theatrical situation appears to be more outlandish than any known human experience, it will always be grounded in some physical, emotional, or spiritual aspect of our reality, or we simply won't comprehend it. This means that writers are observers and interpreters of life. Therefore, it can be said that *everything you need to know about dramatic writing—you already know!*

However, most of what we *know* is unconscious, which makes getting to this information difficult, especially if all we have to rely on is accidental or inadvertent moments of insight and clarity. A successful writer must, therefore, develop and hone an effective process to gain access to the knowledge that lies within. When I'm teaching a course and I notice that a student has suddenly abandoned my lecture and is furiously scribbling in a notebook, I know that the person has just consciously connected with a piece of his or her own process. It's as if the synapses in that person's brain have just forged a new pathway, resulting in a stronger ability to communicate the story that is pulsating through the heart to the brain.

Because writing is a struggle to get to the new, undiscovered place, it will always be a mystery. But it is of little value to a writer if the process of unraveling this mystery is a mystery itself. Therefore, this book is intended to lead you to the discovery of your own inner process. When you, too, become excited and sidetracked by something you have read that solves a current script problem, stimulates a new story idea, or suddenly makes you realize that you have a lot more in common with your characters than you thought, you have just added a new page to your own personal writing manual. In the end, that's the only technique on writing that really matters. You have found your way inside

your own story—and it is from here that a more organic or natural story structure will begin to form around your own unique and original story idea.

A natural story structure is one that reflects the true nature of the human experience. At its core, this structure demonstrates that the conflicts and problems in our outer, physical world do impact our internal reality. When problems of great magnitude arise, our own personal character is tested and often strengthened or diminished by the encounter. I know this to be true because it's how my own character has been formed, and I would ask you to consider how yours was formed as well. To some degree, we are all influenced by the attributes with which we were born: looks, intelligence, strength, and aptitude. However, these traits alone don't determine the *quality* of our character. Characteristics like integrity, compassion, ambition, courage, and resiliency only manifest themselves when something challenges their existence. None of us are born brave or cowardly, considerate or neglectful, benevolent or intolerant: These are personal choices we make when faced with situations that demand our involvement. If we choose to rise to a challenge, then we will inevitably engage a new part of our inner being in the struggle. As a result, we expand and grow toward the fullness of our true nature. However, if we run from or avoid the challenge, we will remain stuck at the same level of existence—doomed to continually re-engage the same challenges until we finally rise above them or are destroyed by them altogether.

In story terminology, this challenge to grow and evolve as we face the trials in our life is referred to as the *transformational arc of the character*. In the film industry and in other literary disciplines, this concept is widely used to indicate the need for interaction or interrelatedness between plot and character development. However, as the theory in this book demonstrates, the transformational arc has much greater significance and value. In effect, it is a second line of structure that is wrapped within the structure of the plot. It is, quite literally, the story that is found *inside story*. When it is well used, it is the driving force of the entire drama. When it is poorly applied or absent, a story will feel shallow and one-dimensional because there is no internal development of character to give meaning and significance to the conflict of the plot.

### *What's Inside the "Inside Story"*

The process in this book begins, “*In the Beginning...*” with Chapter One. It’s difficult to get to “meaning and significance” in a story unless we understand where those values originate, how to tap into them, and—for that matter—why they’re even important.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four set the groundwork or foundation for the development of the transformational arc by defining its three primary building blocks: plot, character, and theme. These chapters are *not* a remedial review of story fundamentals, but rather a reevaluation or, more accurately, a *re-valuing* of the core elements that compose a story. If stories are to have more substance, it’s important that they are built of only the finest construction materials.

Chapter Five defines the *fatal flaw of character*. This is the primary element that sets up the internal value system or *theme* of a story. In the writing process, there are only two substantial ways in which the theme can be expressed: either a character gives speeches about it, or the protagonist is forced to grow toward the thematic value as he or she struggles to resolve the conflict of the plot. Obviously, the second option is far more potent. Defining the fatal flaw of character is the starting point for integrating the development of plot, the movement of character, and the thematic voice of the writer throughout a story.

Whereas Part I of *Inside Story* lays the foundation for the transformational arc, Part II is the construction phase. Chapter Six begins by laying out a blueprint for the arc that will be built upon throughout the remainder of the book. The arc itself is shown to be an organic phenomenon. It expresses the natural rise and fall of a dramatic structure, which always begins with an escalation of tension and is resolved as the tension de-escalates. In a story that fully utilizes the power of the transformational arc, this tension serves not only to solve the conflict of the plot, but also to pull the protagonist toward internal renewal and higher consciousness—which is the essence of the transformational process.

Chapters Seven through Ten illustrate how plot, character, and theme need to move in unity throughout a storyline. Each of these chapters breaks the structure of a script into one of four essential parts: Act I, first half of Act II, second half of Act II, and Act III. As Aristotle described, drama imitates life; therefore, embodied in every movement of the protagonist throughout each of these quadrants is a representation of the archetypal pattern of transformation. These chapters serve as a very powerful guide for writers, providing clear information about what is required at every stage in a story in order to complete the arc and fulfill a *natural* dramatic structure.

## *A Final Note before You Begin*

Keeping the flame of inspiration alive and using it as a guide throughout the writing process is the underlying basis for the techniques and strategies detailed in this book. Most writers have experienced moments of sublime connection with their stories when both the prose and images poured forth perfectly. But if no deliberate process was used to help facilitate that experience, there is no way to retrace those steps and repeat them. The real function of all artistic technique is to make conscious in the artist his or her own innate process. Too often, access to our personal treasury of wisdom and insight is buried under the complexity of the writing process itself. Therefore, what is needed in the way of writing tools are instruments of excavation that can unearth the bounty of self-knowledge that lies beneath the surface of our own stories.

But there is an obvious trap implied in any technique because *technique is not art*; it is only a device that can be used to help the artist maximize the communication of his or her own creative expression. In teaching a method like the one found in these pages, there is always a risk that what is meant to assist writers in understanding and manifesting their own unique vision will be interpreted as “rules” that must be followed. Rules convey a certain authority that presupposes that if you follow them, you succeed—that if you don’t follow them, you fail. Clearly, nothing could be more destructive to the creative process. Therefore, the techniques in this book are meant to be extremely expansive. They invite you to play with established boundaries and push them to new limits. And for those of you who are willing to do the soul-excavating work, you will find that your stories will grow and thrive beyond anything you ever imagined.

*Writing is a tool of transformation and can shine the light on the inside,  
dispelling darkness, taking us through external layers,  
bringing us closer to our souls.*

—Hillary Carlip