

CHAPTER 8:

The Theory of Subplot Relativity

Let's talk a bit about the misery whip.

Whoa, that's a strange place to start a discussion about story Subplots... (Just hang in there a second!)

No, the misery whip is not trying to get the second act of your story right. It's a two-person saw:

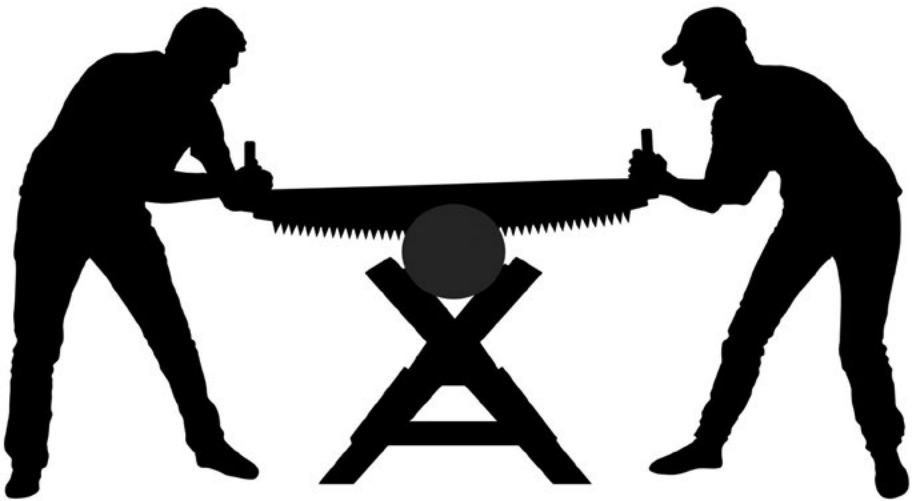


Figure 96: A Misery Whip

Here comes one of the *worst* stories you can imagine (although it's all too common):

One day, a Protagonist came along and noticed a misery whip leaning up against the trunk of a fallen giant oak. Next to the oak is a sign that reads, “Free Oak Table Top! Just find a second person to use this saw and slice a piece of oak off this trunk! Whichever one of you cuts off the piece of oak with the last sawing motion gets to claim the wood!” This was an exciting prospect for the Protagonist because they were in desperate need of a new tabletop for a meeting of the Do-Good Society. Then along came antagonist. Antagonist read the sign and said, “Dang! I need an oak table-top to lay out my plans for world conquest!” So the Protagonist and antagonist each grabbed one end of the saw and started sawing. The Protagonist pulled the saw in one direction. The antagonist yanked it back in the other direction. And so on and so forth. Each committed to their Goal. They sawed...back and forth...non-stop...for over two hours of screen time or three hundred plus pages of a novel. Just...sawing away.

Wow... talk about your misery whips. (No lie!)

There is a point here about *wrong think*.

Although that absurd story is awful and ridiculous, it’s pretty much the way storytelling is taught. A Protagonist with a goal comes up against an obstacle, usually an Antagonist. And it’s focused on the story Plotline, as though that were the thing taking up most of the story’s time.

Consider our eighth universal storytelling truth: Subplots are not subordinate to the main *Plot*.

We do not assume that you have a background in story construction. But, as we have acknowledged before, very likely you do. Most people with an interest in storytelling have at least taken a high school level literature course, and they have a growing library of how-to books and a history of taking expensive adult learning courses.

Presentations vary, but the essence of *plot* theory remains rooted in the ideas found in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and 19th-century German playwright Gustav Freytag. Freytag devised a graph called “Freytag’s pyramid,” which breaks down a plot into 5 essential elements:

- Exposition
- Rising Action

- Climax
- Falling Action
- Resolution

Sometimes this is presented as 7 essential steps, which include the *inciting incident* (or *catalyst*) and the *denouement*. Doubtless, if you have had instruction in story analysis, you have seen at least one of the many versions of a Freytag pyramid. It looks like a peaked mountain or perhaps a lopsided circus tent:

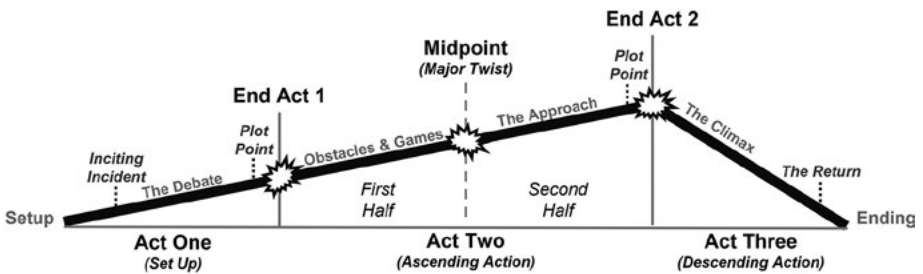


Figure 97: Freytag Pyramid Showing Three-Act Structure

Of course, there are other giants in the field of narrative theory (or *narratology*). One example would be Joseph Campbell's influential work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell was a literature professor who specialized in comparative mythology and comparative religion. His focus was on mythological Archetypes. He popularized a central plot pattern called the hero's journey. That one uses a circular pattern to trace the steps of the Protagonist's journey.

Before the literary intelligentsia break out the pitchforks and torches to come to finish us off at the Your Storytelling Potential Method, understand that the goal here is not to take down the time-honored observations of others. We don't aim to bury their legacies.

What we are challenging is the efficacy of *teaching story construction* based on their observations. Those ideas have tremendous value for *story analysis*. But not necessarily for story construction.

We said from the get-go that this is not just another *how-to* book so much as a how to *think about* book.

Getting back to the Misery Whip story, the point is that there is a flaw to thinking about building your story with a hyper-focus on the Plot. Plots are more like an undersea cable that contains a bundle of wires or optical fibers rather than a single strand. Plots give an *illusion* of being a strong single throughline of logically ordered events. And they give an *illusion* of being focused on a single central story. The fact is most story *Plotlines* are an intricately woven series of related parallel threads wound together by Theme and Relevance.

We don't shy away from employing original terminology for the concepts in this method. Sometimes, however, you must defer to convention. Honestly, we don't love the term *Subplot* because of the *lesser than* denotation. Most dictionary definitions of Subplot will talk about it as a *secondary or subordinate* Plot running alongside the *main Plot*.

But even main Plots are composed of many parallel threads. Then what are Subplots, really?

We are going to talk about "Subplots" just so we're all speaking the same language. Just understand it's something of a flawed word.

Types and Functions of Subplots: The Theory of Subplot Relativity

If a story's Plot has a "line" to it, that line merely represents the forward Momentum of time. It is not appropriate to graph Plotlines in a single directional Movement to represent the *action* of the story. To say that the action is *rising* for this predictable ratio of the story, *peaking* somehow in the middle, and *falling* for another quantifiable duration before reaching the resolution neither accurately portrays what is actually occurring nor what is observed in far too many stories. It's not so universal. Looking at the plot from the perspective of the Your Storytelling Potential Method, the action of the A-Story reaches certain junctures simultaneously with the B-Story action. But we also find plenty of examples of stories where the two sides of the story are out-of-sync and everything realigns by the true Climax and resolution (which is not necessarily in the middle).

Here is what we see as a more accurate overview representation of the Momentum of a story's Subplots:

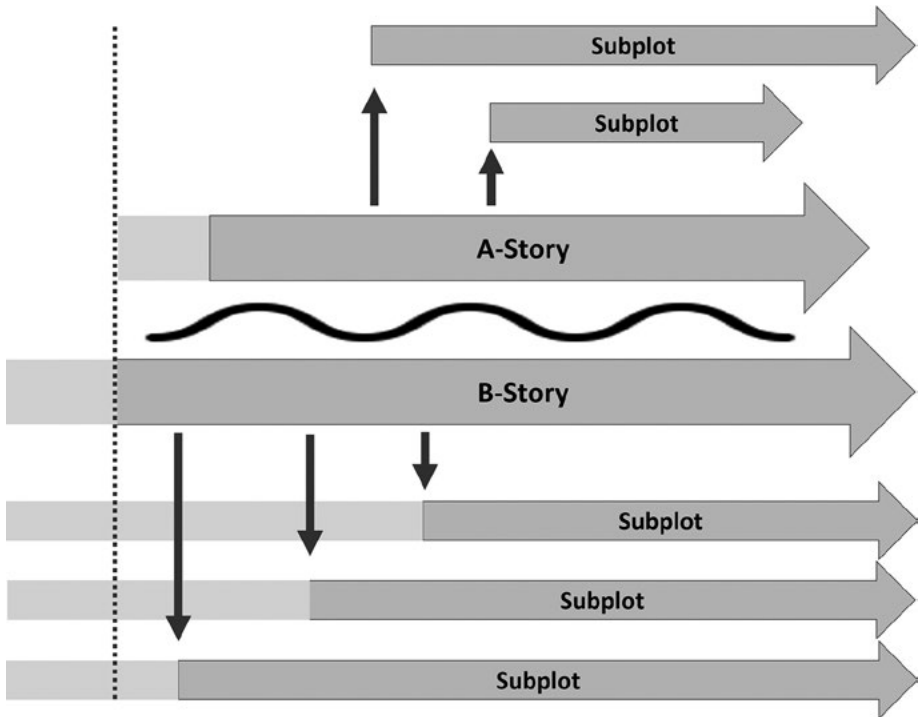


Figure 98: Subplot Momentum

The Subplot diagram probably does not need explanation, but it should be understood that the first vertical dashed line represents the Beginning of the Revealed Story in the Now. As we have discussed previously, the B-Story is presented through Subplots. The Subplots reveal the preexisting relationships from the Main Character's life prior to the Introduction of the new Primary Situation, which initiates the Revealed Story.

A-Stories/Primary Situations tend to feel a bit more concrete. There is a clear order of business for the Main Character to pursue in order to address the major new Problem or Opportunity presented to them. It's possible that your story may have no A-Story relationships—say, a Main Character stranded alone on a desert island or remote planet kind of Situation where the Primary Situation is survival itself. But the vast majority of narratives involve the Main Character encountering a cast of new people related to the A-Story, friends and foes alike.

The Subplot diagram illustrates different Subplots “swimming into view” at different points in the story’s timeline. It goes without saying the number of Subplots in the graphic is arbitrary for explanation purposes. B-Story Subplots enter the story with Momentum and continue into the Unknown Future. *Most* A-Story Subplots run through to the end of the Revealed Story’s Climax, but the vector that goes on represents those relationships forged during the course of the story that turn into potential life-long connections. In an imaginary sequel to this story, that vector would enter the subsequent story as part of the Main Character’s B-Story (think about Sergeant Al Powell in *Die Hard* and *Die Hard 2*, for example).

Given the diagram and everything we just covered, then, it should be clear that stories have *two kinds* of Subplots: *A-Story* Subplots and *B-Story* Subplots.

Within the A-Story, there are breakaway Plots that extend and enhance the A-Story. We think of these A-Story Subplots as ***SIDE PLOTS***.

Within the B-Story, all potential for meaningful, genuine, emotional, and thematic impact of a story comes from these Subplots. We think of B-Story Subplots as *Theme Plots*.

All Subplots are *relationship Plots*. A Subplot shows the Main Character’s relationship with every other major or prominent Character within the story. All meaningful Subplots need to be considered as *independent* Plots.

This includes the *Antagonist* if there is one. Much like we consider the Character Branch separate from the B-Story Branch, the Antagonist may be driving the A-Story as the Proximate Cause Character who has a life and motivations of their own. It may be the Antagonist’s plan is what forms the Primary Situation. But the *relationship* between the Main Character and the Antagonist is a Subplot.

For example:

Terrorists take over the building is the Primary Situation. John McClane’s relationship with Hans Gruber is a Subplot.

Defeating the Dark Lord’s plan to come back and take over the wizarding world is the Primary Situation. Harry’s relationship with Voldemort is a Subplot.

Helping the rebellion to destroy the Death Star is the Primary Situation. Luke's relationship with Darth Vader is a Subplot.

While they are closely entwined, these are distinctively different Elements.

Subplots often feature these relationships:

- Love Interest Character
- Main Relationship Character
- Other Relationship Characters

The advantage of viewing every meaningful relationship to the Main Character through the *individual Subplot* lens keeps us mindful of each Character's essential humanity, that every Character is experiencing a B-Story life of their own, and that each of them moving through the story has a Journey they are on as well. It allows us to imbue every thread of the Plot with depth, richness, and **THEMATIC RELEVANCE**.

Another thing this Subplot diagram moves us towards is *Story Structure*. We believe that mastering the internal logic and Thematic Relevance that comes from the Core Elements and the Three-Branch, 2-Story Model already lends your stories a great deal of natural structure. Everything we have presented has been about building, Layer-by-Layer, and that produces a certain amount of natural structure. It also should place your stories on firmer ground if you choose to experiment with structure because your stories will retain the internal logic of consciously applied Relevance. But there is much more to come on the topic of Structure in a later chapter.

Implementing Subplots

Let's review what we have said about *Subplots*:

- Theme is expressed through Subplots
- Theme is the connective glue between the A and B stories
- B-Story is entirely expressed through Subplots
- Every meaningful Character in the story has a relationship with the Main Character
- Every meaningful relationship is a Subplot
- A-Story Subplots move the A-Story forward

The conclusion you are forced to draw is that the *majority* of a Revealed Story consists of *Subplots!*

You might recoil at that assertion.

You mean to say that *all* of the B-Story and *most* of the A-Story are just *Subplots?*

This is an idea that has to take into account *scale*. Going back to the very beginning where the goals for this book were laid out, we said these essential principles are applicable to all manner of storytelling. So it is to be expected that things vary based on format and genre concerns. Is this absolutely true for an anecdote, a short story, or a 5-minute film? Obviously, the briefer the content, the more focused on the Primary Situation it necessarily has to be.

The larger and more complex your story, however, the more we find that A-Story Plot focus takes a backseat to human relationships and Thematic concerns. This is definitely true for most long-form fiction. Novels, screenplays, stage plays, episodic television, serialized comics and graphic novels, and so forth.

This is something you can prove to yourself through an analytical thought experiment. Take your favorite work and scrupulously identify how much page or screen time is devoted to the A-Story Problem or Opportunity. It can be shocking to go through a movie and identify the scenes that address the Primary Situation head-on. Not just how *few* scenes are devoted to it, but just how *short* those scenes can be.

The simplest illustration of this principle is the action movie where the A-Story *moves* via the action sequences. There are examples of action movies that are essentially non-stop action. By and large, these are not well received but by the most ardent action junkies. General audiences looking for richer storytelling gravitate toward action movies with great human stories to justify the action. These are the films that stand the test of time. The genre demands action sequences at regular intervals and a certain amount of straightforward Plot development and strategic discussion dialogue—such as the agency commander briefing the agent about the mission. But the *majority* of a great action movie deals with the human

drama so that the audience becomes invested in the outcome of the physical conflicts. In other words, A and B story Subplots.

Good Will Hunting

We have discussed Academy Award winner *Rocky* at length throughout this book. And we have repeatedly noted that it's a story that is almost all B-Story.

Decades later comes another Academy Award winner for best original screenplay. And it is almost the same story. We are now talking about the 1997 film *Good Will Hunting*. Matt Damon's Character, Will Hunting, is a uniquely talented genius. He is a lower-middle-class working guy holding down a janitorial job at MIT who gets caught expressing his hidden aptitude when he solves a challenging publicly posted mathematical problem that would take most elite mathematicians months, even years, to solve. At the same time, Will is a street brawler who finds himself behind the 8-ball legally when he strikes a police officer. Lambeau, the professor who posted the math problem, persuades the judge to remand Will to his supervision provided he agrees to work on advanced math under his guidance and to attend psychological counseling. Over the course of the story, Will finds romance with a Harvard undergrad, Skyer. And ultimately, he has to confront the emotional damage inflicted on him through the foster care system before he is ready to take on life and love.

The A-Story—the new Primary Situation in his life—is the Opportunity to develop his math genius under Lambeau's supervision. A major A-Story Subplot (the *side Plot*) is a relationship he forges with Robin Williams' counselor Character, Sean. It's fair to say that Will spends much more screen time with Sean than he does with Lambeau. And of course, the very nature of counseling means they relate on a very personal (and therefore *thematic*) level. They're *not* discussing math. The math-related material is a handful of short scenes, most less than a minute, scattered over the two-hour runtime. Perhaps a total of 5 minutes or so.

Even the scenes between Lambeau and Sean do not, strictly speaking, *move* the A-Story forward. In the most perfunctory sense, Sean has to

report Will's progress as part of the court order, but that is not what the content of those scenes is predominantly about. Lambeau and Sean have a relationship history, and Sean's story parallels Will's on the thematic level—hence the connection they make. Both Lambeau and Sean have significant Character Wave Journeys in their own right, all related back to the same central Theme.

Meanwhile, a large part of the story is Will's B-Story. Much like Rocky Balboa, Will Hunting is a guy from the grimy streets who hasn't realized his potential. They both have settled into being products of a lesser environment. Both have been beaten down by life: Rocky in the tough Philadelphia neighborhoods and Will at the hands of abusive foster parents. Rocky maintains a relatively positive outlook on life but harbors low self-esteem. Will is a bit of the opposite—confident in his abilities but absolutely guarded against an outside world that he mistrusts. The movie spends a lot of time with Will hanging out with his lifelong gang of blue-collar, going nowhere drinking buddies. And although Skyler enters his life during the course of the Revealed Story, they meet during one of these hangouts at a bar. She has nothing to do with MIT or his Opportunity with Lambeau. Their relationship reveals Will's inability to open up, trust, and connect.

You could unravel *Good Will Hunting* into a series of parallel short story plots: Will and his best friend Chuckie (Ben Affleck), Will and Lambeau, Will and Sean, Will and Skyler, Sean and Lambeau. The amount of time spent *directly* on the Primary Situation (the mathematics) and the Underlying Cause (legal troubles) is negligible. They're there. They frame the story. But the time is rightly devoted to Subplots of human relationships.

One of the most powerful throughlines in the film involves a recurring motif between Chuckie and Will. These Main Characters are introduced in a seemingly throwaway dialogue-less mini-scene cut into the opening credits. Chuckie and their pals, Billy and Morgan, roll up the alleyway in Chuckie's old beater to the back door of the rundown building where Will rents his basic one-room apartment. Chuckie gets out, walks across the littered backyard to Will's porch, and knocks. Will comes out. They walk together back

to the car. The car drives off for the group to go waste time hanging out and getting into the day's trouble. This visual motif repeats itself, again seemingly establishing not much more than a mundane routine.

But near the Climax of the film, Will and Chuckie are sweating the day away at a construction job and taking a break for lunch. Will has let Skyler go off to California without him, and he's making it clear that nothing is going to come of the math work he's been doing with Lambeau. He's satisfied with continuing to remain underemployed and a forever member of their buddy crew. Chuckie slams Will's satisfaction with this projected future. He tells Will that for him to waste his opportunities in life—opportunities the rest of his friends will never see—would be an insult *to them*. And he confesses the best part of his day is walking up to Will's door to collect him for these hangouts, hoping that one day Will won't be there, having skipped town without a goodbye to go take hold of the life he could have. Of course, that is precisely what happens in the film's final moments.

As that final visit to Will's door happens on-screen, the film also cuts to Sean, who has been so incredibly instrumental in Will Hunting's transformative Journey. Will has left Sean a personal note on his door. The note echoes something Sean said when he relayed a story about meeting his now-deceased wife while passing up the Opportunity to attend a legendary Boston Red Sox playoff game. It was a story about pursuing chances with no regrets. And the note declares Will's intention of chasing Skyler to California, having finally reached the place where he can be vulnerable, trusting, and willing to go after a better life for himself.

Great examples of the weaving of Plotlines—aka *Subplots*.

Subplot Case Studies: The Thematic Conflict Arena

Theme is the glue that binds stories together. Remaining mindful of Theme presents the possibility of infusing relevant depth into every aspect of your story, leading to a richer, more coherent tale. But, as we have detailed previously, the Thematic Layer of your Core Elements—wherein the Thematic Conflict of Theme-vs-Opposing Idea plays out—primarily comes by way of Subplots.

Think back to this conceptual image from the fourth chapter on Thematic Connections:

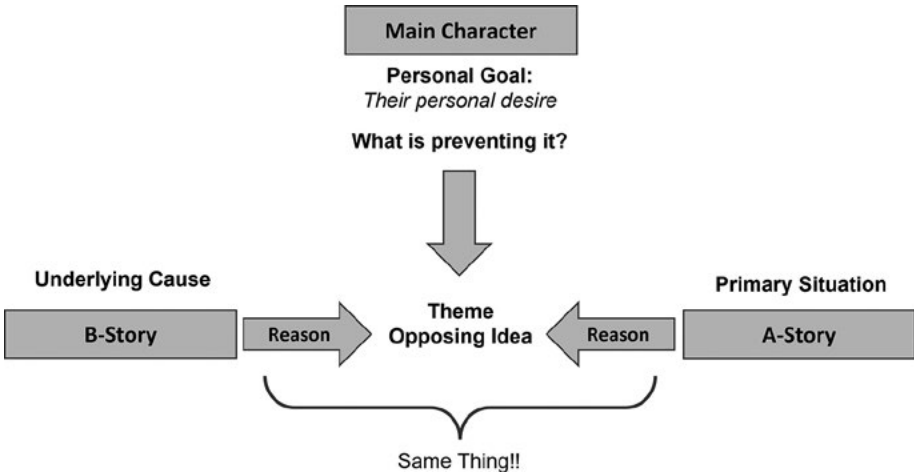


Figure 99: Thematic Connections

As we isolate Theme and Subplots in this dynamic, we see the Thematic Conflict at work:



Figure 100: Thematic Conflict

This essential duality provides the framework for the Thematic Conflict present in every meaningful relationship to the Main Character in the story. And, as we know, this back-and-forth of opposing forces creates the Character Wave.

Rarely does anything in life operate in simplistic cut-and-dried terms. We consistently caution against black-and-white absolute thinking. It's far too oversimplified to say that *every* relationship presents a polarized opposite conflict of ideas. This is a limited and general observation, but the more strongly drawn the moral sides—as with most good-versus-evil conflicts in action stories, for instance—the more apt we are to see *good guy* Characters in opposition to *bad guy* Characters. Therefore, *some* of the thematic influence arguments present in certain relationship Character Sub-

plots pull more in one direction than the other. It's a zero-sum game, and it should be only as complex as necessary to serve the needs of a given story.

Now we return to our five major example IPs and explore the Thematic Conflict within the important Subplot relationships. We acknowledge that there are almost always multiple thematic ideas at work in stories, so disagreeing with our perspective on the specifics of any one story's major Theme does not automatically discount the validity of the Subplot-Theme dynamic. These are stories with complexity, so these ideas are open for debate. But the conversation itself should be enough to make the point and empower you to infuse your own tales with amazing, relevant, thematically-rooted Subplots.

Liar Liar

Major Thematic Conflict: Ethical Honesty vs Necessary Lying to Achieve Ends

Subplot 1: Fletcher's Son vs the Case

The B-Story Subplot is the story of Max making his wish that his father *cannot lie* for one day. Opposing that, the A-Story counters with the *needs of the case*.

Subplot 2: Fletcher's *strained relationship* with his ex-wife vs Fletcher's Desire to have the *best relationship he can envision* with his son

This one may be harder to see as a struggle at first. Fletcher's ex, Audrey, feels compelled to take any opportunity to *put distance between* Max and his father who continually *hurts him* with his lies, to the point that she is prepared to move to Boston to pursue a relationship with a man she isn't that crazy about. On the other side of the coin, Fletcher's Desire to be a provider with a legacy of achievement is a crucial element of being his best version of a dad to Max he can be, thus justifying his *unscrupulous behavior* to get ahead at work. He fears losing his son. The Characterization of Fletcher is hugely important because it reveals a man whose dishonest behavior is in service to his (misguided) idea of what it takes to be a good father.

Subplot 3: The Job vs the Wish

On the B-Story side, the job reinforces the idea that lying is *okay* and sometimes *required* in order to succeed. Fletcher stands to be rewarded handsomely for being a liar. From the other side, the wish *prevents* him from *lying*, which jeopardizes his ability to perform in the case he must win, and sets him down the path of confronting his ethics. Subplot 3 mirrors Subplot 1 as both sides of this coin are woven into the two sides of the story.

Subplot 4: Secretary Greta vs Fletcher's Inability to Lie

Fletcher relies on the support of his loyal secretary, who swallows her own sense of ethics to follow her boss's directives and back up his plays. But she fails to realize how much of *their* relationship is predicated on deceptions as well. Suddenly when he cannot lie, Fletcher experiences the pain of losing his support system because when people learn the truth, there are *consequences* to lying. His desperate attempts to circumvent the inability to lie cause him to seek Greta's help carrying out deceptions on his behalf, thus exposing the lies he has told her.

Star Wars

Major Thematic Conflict: Light Side of the Force vs Dark Side of the Force

Subplot 1: Leia's Example of Leadership.

There are additional layers of complexity to the Theme in *Star Wars*, as certain relationships become revealed in subsequent episodes. In Episode IV, the audience is unaware that Leia is Luke Skywalker's sister. But she is part of the Rebellion—a *family* of sorts bound together by a common cause. All Luke learns in the first on-screen adventure is that his father *was* a Jedi who fought for the same principles represented by the Rebels today. He knows his would-be mentor, Kenobi, has an alliance with Leia's people. His Personal Goal relative to the galactic conflict is to oppose the Empire, though he does not understand his actual role.

Without getting hypercritical about defining the B-Story aspects of the Leia Subplot versus the A-Story aspects, suffice to say between the Underlying Cause familial relationships involved and the Primary Situation causation, Leia straddles both sto-

ries. In addition to the personal connection, Leia clearly inspires Luke with her strong example of *selfless* leadership and *commitment* to cause. She plows forward like a force of nature, razor-focused on the business at hand. Obi-Wan offers Luke a spiritual view of life where his problems can be solved by letting go and trusting in mystical powers that guide things. Leia offers Luke a down-to-earth approach where decisive action and picking up a blaster gives you a chance against very real enemies.

Subplot 2: Obi-Wan and the Jedi

This one could just as well be *Obi-Wan vs The Dark Side of The Force*. Each of the three *Star Wars* trilogies details a three-episode Character Wave where the Dark Side battles the Light Side for the soul of one principle novice in the ways of The Force. And each saga supplies both a mentor and a tempter representing the dual sides. In *Episode IV*, it's the older Obi-Wan *embodying* the Light Side and the *lure* of becoming a Jedi that appeals to Luke's better nature.

Subplot 3: Darth Vader and the Empire

Vader is less of a tempter in *Episode IV* than he is in its two sequels. Luke does not learn the truth of their relationship until after this installment. But he does learn from Obi-Wan that Vader was once a Jedi *like* his father and that he was *seduced* to join the Dark Side. If nothing else, Luke is aware of the danger the Dark Side presents. Though the series gives us little reason to doubt Luke's goodness and resolve, the later revelation that Obi-Wan needed to lie about Vader's true identity to shield Luke from the danger of falling prey to the Dark Side makes us appreciate its attractive power.

Subplot 4: Han Solo and Personal Preservation

Like Leia in *Episode IV*, Han Solo represents a skeptical perspective. He does not even believe in the Force. It's all a lot of *simple tricks and nonsense*. And nothing beats having a good blaster at your side. Unlike Leia, Han does not want to be involved. He is just in it for the *money*. He's an outlaw with a bounty on his head, and anything he does has a price tag on it because he needs to pay off some heavy debts to sinister Characters. If the chips are down, Han believes in gathering up what you have and getting out while the getting is good. It's not that he has no backbone, he's down for

a fight if the situation calls. He's just about taking the calculated risk and looking out for *number one*. A rogue space pirate.

Lest it should ever sound as though the Your Storytelling Potential Method champions a viewpoint that stories have just one theme—the *Theme*—here is a case that demonstrates that is not what we're saying at all. The *major* Theme of *Star Wars* is the two sides of The Force. With the Leia and Han Subplots, we see a secondary but related thematic idea: *selfless devotion* to principle and leadership versus *self-interest*. It is easy to see how the Light Side of the Force relates to selfless leadership for a young Jedi-in-Training. Just as it stands to reason that if Luke were to adopt Han's philosophy, the easier it might have been for him to turn to the Dark Side.

Die Hard

Major Thematic Conflict: True Identity vs Hidden Identity

Die Hard demonstrates that Theme need not be something transcendent and profound. Theme is frequently a simple idea. A motif. Often it is the variations on a Theme that enrich the work.

Subplot 1: Holly McClane vs Holly Gennaro

This is the dynamic of the marriage identity versus self-identity: *wife* vs *career*. Things are rocky in the McClane household. John has an old-fashioned patriarchal view of family life. Holly made a decision at some point to assert her identity and took an opportunity that pulled her away geographically *and* gave her independence, as she decided using her *maiden name* best served her interests for advancement in a company where a married woman is seen as having different priorities than those of the business. *Gennaro* is a statement about both the marriage and her sense of self. Then, of course, it also becomes a shield of sorts when it keeps Hans from connecting her with McClane.

Subplot 2: Hans Gruber vs “Mr. Cowboy”

For a large part of the film, Hans does not *know* who John McClane is or exactly why he is in the building. This is a Problem. One of the very first advantages McClane claims is by learning the names of Hans and most of his crew thanks to the CB radio he steals

from one of the team. Hans tries to get the mystery man to divulge his name by taunting him with a guess that he might be a rogue security guard who's seen one too many cowboy movies, and is trying to emulate the classic western movie star Roy Rogers. Failing to elicit any actual information, he dubs McClane "Mr. Cowboy." It's not only vexing—which can be an advantage itself, playing on the man's psychology—but also offers a real tactical advantage because Hans cannot accurately predict his strategies.

On the flip side, McClane has not seen Hans because he's staying hidden. And no one knows Hans and his team are really thieves and not terrorists. So Hans is playing the *hidden identity* game as well.

Subplot 3: LA Cop Al Powell and "Roy"

McClane has no private mode of communication with the outside world. It's all open CB signal. McClane and Powell know the *terrorists* are listening in. Drawing on Hans's earlier goading comparison to Roy Rogers, McClane initially introduces himself to Powell as "Roy." And he feeds Powell as much information about the "terrorists" and their plan as he can without overtly stating that he's a New York cop or involved in law enforcement. Powell makes guesses that "Roy" may be a *cop* based on inference, though his less sharp superior remains suspicious about the possibility that this faceless nobody on the radio could be one of the terrorists feeding them false intel. They forge a genuine bond by reading between the lines to protect McClane's identity. McClane's communications with Powell constitute an A-Story Subplot or *Side Plot*.

Subplot 4: TV Reporter Richard Thornburg and *His Own Identity*

Thornburg represents the unscrupulous ratings-hungry modern media. Even by the late 1980s, there was a growing sense that journalistic ethics were beginning to take a backseat to sensationalism and a drive to *be first* with salacious news, even if it sometimes means being factually wrong. Thornburg is shown to be a slimy opportunist who does not care who he hurts—stooping so low as to threaten Holly's immigrant housekeeper-nanny about revealing her legal status if she does not grant him access to the McClane children for his report. He's all about *his own identity* and shining as a *rising star*. As a result, he puts lives in jeopardy by revealing John and Holly's *identity* on public airwaves, thus arming Hans with information about who he is up against, and most significantly, who Holly really is.

Rocky

Major Thematic Conflict: INNER vs OUTER—Belief in Yourself/Self Worth vs Outward Achievements/Validation

Subplot 1: Adrian’s Lack of Self Confidence

Adrian is truly Rocky’s complement. He is *outgoing*; she is *shy*. Neither has any sense of self-worth. Adrian works in a pet shop and at some point, sold Rocky a pair of turtles. Metaphorically, she is almost like a small pet turtle—timid and ready to withdraw into her shell at the slightest provocation. Rocky has a big heart. Rocky loves his turtles, and it’s understandable that he would be drawn to Adrian, who could benefit from his protective nature. In an earlier discussion of *Rocky*, we detailed the reciprocal advice received from their parents: he needs to develop his body because he doesn’t have much of a brain, and she should develop her brain because she doesn’t have much of a body. As Rocky notes, “She’s got gaps, I’ve got gaps, together we fill gaps.”

Subplot 2: Paulie and Failure

There is not a lot to help us understand the friendship Rocky has with Paulie. Paulie demonstrates few likable characteristics beyond his loyalty. He’s a grouching, heavy drinking, slovenly, abusive, loudmouth. We believe that Rocky’s kinship with Paulie has been forged in the fires of tough neighborhood life and familiarity. Paulie represents their childhood and their environment. Rocky accepts Paulie as he does the rest of the urban decay and filth of the blue-collar Philadelphia streets. In short, Paulie reflects the *acceptance* of the lack of opportunity. Nothing is ever likely to change in their lives. It’s the same old corners, with the same neighborhood bums, hanging out at the same bar, and grinding it out at the same punch-the-clock jobs. Over the course of the films, Rocky and Paulie trade the same low-level jobs: alternating between collecting for loan shark Gazzo and hauling sides of beef at the meatpacking plant. All that prevents Rocky from becoming Paulie is boxing.

Subplot 3: Mickey and the Need to Want It

Here we’re talking about *genuine commitment*. There’s a key scene after Rocky learns that his boxing gym locker has been given to a younger prospect where Mickey

angrily barks his true feelings about the Italian Stallion. He says Rocky had the talent to become a good fighter but wasted his talent becoming “a leg breaker for a two-bit loan shark.” Mickey genuinely believes in Rocky and laments that he never made the most of his gifts, opting instead to accept the life of low expectations he was born into. He *gave up* on Rocky because Rocky failed to go all-in. But Mickey has also learned some very hard lessons about making the most of chances and wasted potential in his own boxing career. So when Rocky’s Opportunity shows up, Mickey sees an opening for himself to genuinely help Rocky and achieve something together.

Subplot 4: Apollo and Overconfidence

The counterpoint to Mickey would have to be Apollo Creed. Mickey thinks Rocky has the goods to be a good fighter but has lost faith in Rocky and takes away Rocky’s chances of continuing his training. Apollo is prepared to offer Rocky a chance, specifically because he is a nobody-unknown underdog. No respect. He doesn’t take Rocky *seriously*. He brushes off any warnings about the challenger’s boxing style and isn’t interested in watching the hard-hitting bruiser cracking frozen beef ribs while training on television. For Apollo, this boxing match is a gimmick. He’s only interested in putting on a *show* for cash.

Harry Potter Series

Major Thematic Confidence: Greatness vs Normalcy

Subplot 1: Hagrid and the Call to Be Special

“Yer a wizard, Harry.” A *call to adventure* doesn’t get more overt and specific than that. Up to this point, Harry Potter believes himself to be the orphaned son of two people killed in an auto accident. Of course, the flurry of letters that Harry is not permitted to look at arriving by the bushel via owls begins to raise suspicions that something extraordinary is going on. But the arrival and friendship of a legitimate magic-wielding giant, Hagrid, opens Harry’s eyes to his true nature. More than that, Hagrid fills Harry in on his elevated status in the wizarding world through the legend of thwarting Voldemort as “The Boy Who Lived.” And he guides Harry through the initial introduction to the passageways accessing the hidden world, the bank where his parents

have left him a fortune, the shops where he equips himself, and the special train that transports him to his new school and life. Hagrid is also the one to inform Harry that he is considered a *half-blood*—part wizard, part regular human—which is a significant central class conflict in wizard society.

Subplot 2: Hermione and Muggle Bloods

Harry's two best friends throughout his Hogwarts adventures offer an interesting thematic dichotomy. Hermione is a *muggle blood*. "Muggle" is the wizards' word for non-magical, ordinary human beings. But Hermione *excels* in the wizarding world disciplines nonetheless, casting spells like an expert and mastering potions with precision. She demonstrates the wizarding arts are available to anyone committed to them. Yet there is a social price to pay in a community as sadly preoccupied with status, inheritance, and purity as the rest of humanity often is.

Subplot 3: Ron and Pure Bloods

Balancing Hermione is Harry's try-hard underachiever buddy, Ron Weasley. Ron is Hermione's opposite—so perhaps it's little wonder they are destined for one another. The Weasley Family are almost literally the *red-headed stepchildren* of the wizarding world. Ironically, they are "purebloods"—100% wizard blood. They are notoriously rough around the edges, a bit eccentric, materially not well-off, and looked down upon by wizard high society. In particular, Ron struggles with his studies. His spells usually go a bit off the tracks and his potions are more likely to produce toxic results. He's trying to get by with secondhand equipment and isn't able to replace a broken wand if he has one. He *struggles* in the wizarding world, despite his pureblood status.

Subplot 4: Dumbledore and Acceptance

Hermione and Ron might be Harry's immediate allies in the trials he faces, but on the larger stage, they are reliant on the wisdom, support, and experience of Hogwarts headmaster Professor Dumbledore and several of the major faculty. Dumbledore represents the *good* side of wizarding. A lot of what he has to teach Harry is acceptance—specifically about *accepting one's role*. There are a good many difficult realities that must be faced and hardships to overcome. Wizarding ain't all rainbows and ponies. More than anyone, Dumbledore shepherds Harry to grow comfortable with his true

calling and step up to the challenge of being the one who must ultimately confront “He Who Must Not Be Named.”

Subplot 5: Voldemort and the Demand of Purity

J.K. Rowling leveraged a bit of history’s greatest 20th-century real-world villain, Adolf Hitler, in crafting Harry’s arch-nemesis, Voldemort. Part of Hitler’s legacy that gets debated is what role his own appearance may or may not have played in his views of pure German ancestry, as he lacked the blond hair and blue eyes emblematic of *pure* Germans. There may be nothing to that in actuality, but it is interesting that Voldemort’s ultimate goal is the purification of the wizard race while he himself is only a half-blood. Voldemort and his followers, the “Death Eaters,” obviously represent the *evil* side of wizardry. The ideal wizard family by these standards are the snotty pure blood Malfoys, all of whom sport flowing golden locks.

Once again we must acknowledge this *Harry Potter* analysis focuses on the broadest aspects of the entire series arc. Each novel in the series offers its own cast of secondary-level allies and foes with relevant Thematic Conflicts.

In these last two chapters, we have immersed ourselves in the Core Elements and Subplots. This represents something of a conceptual capstone to the Your Storytelling Potential Method. We began by introducing the 2-Story Model and have shown how the Thematic Conflict reveals an ongoing conceptual war for a Main Character’s soul that is expressed in the conflict between the Theme and the Opposing Idea. This dynamic produces what we think of as the Character Wave—the Main Character’s Journey towards Transformation. And now you should see the Core Elements as the pavers for that Journey’s path and Subplots as the vehicles for Thematic Conflict.

Taken all together, this awareness should already provide the Author-Storyteller with an amazing internal narrative Structure born of Thematic Relevance.

Moving into our next chapter, we turn to a practical discussion about *Story Structure* itself.