The Mechanics of Scene

Workshop 102: Fiction
San Miguel de Allende Writers' Conference
Wednesday, February 14th:, 3:45—5:15 PM
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The Centrality of Scene

- Until thoughts and emotions are acted upon, they remain mere possibilities. Once they exist in behavior and not just contemplation, they can't be taken back. Our actions anchor us once and for all, for better or worse, in the world.
- Characters engage each other in scene: They weigh options, make choices, struggle for what they want, strive to protect it, face the consequences, take responsibility, and plow ahead.
- Scenes make conflict is overt: something crucial is at stake, someone stands to gain, someone stands to lose. How one withstands such a contest defines who he is.
- Scenes externalize conflicting emotions, values, and ideas by making the characters act on them.

Launching the Story

Three ways to introduce the Calling or Crisis:

1. Give the hero what he wants then snatch it away. (He loses something vital and must regain or replace it.) Examples: divorce stories, loss/death stories, revenge stories, kidnap stories, "falsely accused"/redemption stories.
2. Show the hero what he wants then dangle it in front of him. (Reveal to him what he wants and make him pursue it.) Examples: love stories, war stories, heist stories, adventure/road stories.
3. Force what the hero dreads upon him and make him escape or defeat it. (Create a trauma that he must somehow overcome.) Example: mysteries, thrillers, disaster stories, horror stories, "bad neighbor/relative" stories.

Important points:

- The hero may not know yet what he wants, or dreads, and you may have to create the moment(s) of (increasing) recognition.
- These three techniques are not mutually exclusive.
- Different levels of struggle (internal, external, interpersonal) may be triggered in different ways.

Fundamental Methodology

Stories are not about what happens. They're about what goes wrong. (Or, as Les Edgerton puts it, all stories are about the same thing: trouble.)

Three Questions to Ask with Each Scene:

1. *What would the character naturally do in this situation?* (Establishes believability and causality.) Remember, however, the deeper you get into the story, the more reckless or improvisational your character may become.
2. *What goes wrong? How can I make it worse?*
   Important: Intensify struggles. Don't just multiply them. A story isn't about something *else* going wrong. It's about something *worse* going wrong.
3. *How can I end the scene in a way that's both surprising and yet inevitable?*
   Give readers what they want (or something better) in a way they don't expect.
   Paradox of storytelling: Readers want to be able to predict where the story is going, but they also want to be wrong.

Crucial Takeaway: If noting changes, you don't have a scene.

Structural Mechanics

Structurally, each scene possesses three key elements, a beginning, a middle, and an end:

The Setup: This lays out the situation among the characters as the scene begins. It routinely poses a question, presents a dilemma, or otherwise sets out the groundwork for the conflict that defines the scene.

The Turning Point: This is an unexpected turn of events—an action, a decision, a reversal or a revelation—that in some way forces a significant change among the understanding, status, or power relationship among the characters.

The Payoff: The climax of the scene, presenting the new state of affairs created by the Turning Point. It may be only momentary or merely implicit given the Turning Point. The payoff often creates the Setup for the following scene (or the next scene in this sequence or plotline).

The Character's Perspective

Story relies on tension, and tension is created by unmet desire. (Story = desire, struggle, consequences, discovery)

The three main areas of unmet desire:

a. *Internal questions*
b. *External struggles*
c. *Interpersonal relationships*

Therefore, from the viewpoint of character, scenes have these three crucial elements:

- *Objective*: What the character wants in the scene (on all three levels). *This includes how he hopes to feel at the conclusion of the struggle.*
- *Obstacle*: The force within the scene that stands between the character and his objective.
- *Action*: The tactic(s) the character employ(s) to overcome the obstacle and continue pursuing his objective.

A character may employ several actions within a scene in his continuing attempt to overcome the obstacle—each such action/reaction is called a *beat*—and each failed attempt represents another turn, until the dilemma or question posed by the setup is somehow fulfilled or answered (the payoff).

More often than not, the scene concludes with the protagonist failing to accomplish his objective, succeeding only partially, or succeeding in such a way that other problems now present themselves ("success with setback"), spurring him on to rethink his strategy or reassess his goal. In a sense, this failure is a success, because it forces the protagonist to re-assess himself, his plan, or his circumstances. This is how the protagonist becomes stronger, wiser, more resolute. (He "succeeds by failing," as some writing texts put it.)

Important: Focus on causality in moving from beat to beat or scene to scene: Transitions between scenes should be able to be worded as "But" or "Therefore." If instead they can be worded as "And then…" you're in trouble.

Sequences and Sequels

At the end of each scene, and at times within it—particularly as the character is reacting to what is happening, weighing his options—he will:

1) experience the emotional impact of what's happened;
2) think through what to do, suffer an insight or a change of heart; and
3) form a decision as to what to do next.

This respite section of emotion, thought, and decision is often called the *sequel*, and the rising conflict of your story will build through the alternation between *scenes and sequences* that emphasize dramatic action and *sequels* that process that action through a brief responsive episode of feeling, reflection, and determination of what to do next.

Balancing Action and Inner Life

In judging the relative weight of scenes and sequels—dramatic action on the one hand, emotion and thought on the other— or simply how much introspection to place within a single scene, keep thought and feeling in service to action, so that they:

- lead to an insight that informs a decision, a plan, or a change in the character's sense of self;
- comment ironically on the exterior action taking place within the same scene; and/or
- express internally what the character, for whatever reason, declines to act upon or say out loud.

Otherwise, let the action and dialogue speak for itself.

Dramatic Intensification through Scene Sequence

a. ***Intensify tension, not action.*** (Note misleading title of above diagram.)

b. Action does not equal tension. (Remember: tension is created by unmet desire. Sometimes it's the *inability to act* creates tension.)

c. ***Repetition undermines escalation.***
    i. *Role repetition:* Two or more characters serving the same dramatic function.
    ii. *Action repetition:* multiple chases, attacks, confrontations, etc.
    iii. *Struggle repetition*: Multiple characters with the same internal or interpersonal struggle. Unity or redundancy?
    iv. *Voice repetition:* Characters sound or act too much alike.

d. Repetition can also be avoided by constantly building *a chain of causality with increasing stakes*, scene by scene.

e. The way to *raise stakes* is to increase the value of what is desired.
    i. The value of the thing desired is directly proportional to the pain required to obtain it or the pain caused when it is lost.
    ii. So, either increase the pain of obtaining/losing the thing desired or change the thing desired to one more valuable (i.e., harder to obtain).

f. Just as there is no tension without desire, *there is no terror or suspense without hope.* Piling on danger or stacking one frightening scene on top of another risks undermining tension through repetition, and doesn't produce genuine fright without the prospect of a more hopeful outcome.

    To make the reader feel dread, panic, or terror, you must first plant the seeds of hope. The reader is trying to *avoid* the feeling of terror or dread or panic. You have to give them *hope* the character will make the choice that will lead her *away from* the terror dread or panic.

Questions to Ask to Enhance Hope and thus Tension

In a confrontation/pursuit story

1. Why must the character get what he wants or stop the terrible thing?
2. Why does it matter?
3. How can I make it matter more to him?
4. What must he prove to himself or others?
5. How has he failed before?
6. What is the wound that will be healed, or the missing thing that will be returned if he succeeds?
7. Why is this struggle a matter of principle?
8. How is the villain/opponent wrong?
9. What has the character not yet discovered about himself or his world but now learns? (My reason for being is _____. Why?)

In a flight/escape story

1. What does the hero have to live for?
2. What is the single most meaningful moment in the past?
3. What is the greatest hope for the future?
4. What joy has he not yet experienced?
5. Who does he hope to see if he survives? Why?
6. What is so wonderful about the place he's running toward?
7. What are the reasons to live?

Ten Ways to Escalate Tension:

i. *Intensify the opponent's determination to prevail.*
ii. *Escalate the danger via proximity* (bring it closer).
iii. *Escalate in magnitude* (a small danger – one person killed – grows larger – multiple people at risk).
iv. *Create a countdown to an impending disaster/tragedy*.
v. *Decrease the time available to solve the problem*.
vi. *Let readers but not the characters know about impending threats or menace* (dramatic irony—works better in thrillers than mysteries).
vii. *Include progressively thornier* ***moral dilemmas***.
viii. *Make it personal*.
ix. *Raise the stakes.* (Deepen the danger, make the consequences of failure more severe, challenge the characters to perform under increasingly more difficult circumstances, eliminate potential solutions to the problem, drive a wedge between allies or a deeper wedge between the character and the object of his desire.
x. *Isolate the hero.* (Create ways to remove tools, escape routes, allies.)

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