

Good Morning everyone, this is Trevor Van Winkle, and you're listening to – Homestead on the Corner.

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Let me just start by saying – I don't like writing plots.

That might not be what you want to hear at the start of a three-episode mini-series on plot, but I have to be honest: of the three elements of the Story Triangulum, plot is by far my least favorite.

Writing characters is like meeting new friends, and when I discover a new story to tell it's practically a religious experience.

But cracking the plot – crafting the nitty gritty between “Once upon a time” and “Happily (or unhappily) ever after” – is a chore for me. I mean that in the literal sense – it's a menial, almost mechanical task, figuring out how to string scenes together one after another in a way that's compelling enough to hold *my* interest, much less the reader's.

That might make it seem like I'm not qualified to teach about writing plot – but actually, I think it's exactly the opposite. Since it doesn't come as naturally to me as it does to other writers, I have to dig into each story, look at all everything I *could* include carefully, and determine which ones work and which need to be cut, and how to structure them. I'm very proud of the last few story scripts for many reasons, but one of them is the way their plots have been built. As the stories have grown in both scope and length, I've been forced to be ruthless with any scenes that don't add to the overall plot in a meaningful way.

Blindsights, especially, doesn't start a moment before it needs to and only features one flashback, despite telling (in broad strokes) the story of Sam's entire life. *Worlds Apart*, similarly, tells the story of an entire rom-com in 30 minutes or less, without feeling like it's missing any essential beats. In writing *Return to the Echowood*, I was sorely tempted to spend time on Rowan's day exploring her childhood fantasy world or to include more flashbacks to “the good old days,” but I quickly realized the focus needed to be the relationship between her and Graef in the present. Such extra scenes, while fun, would probably have turned out as insubstantial filler that had no place in the story.

The one thing all of those stories have in common is that they are explicitly character driven. The plot is in service to character

exploration, evolution, and development. They are all driven by the choices of characters and the often-unintended consequences of those choices, and by their effect throughout the character web. This is, in part, because I was writing the lessons on character in parallel to those stories, but it's also because those are the types of stories I like to tell. *The Grätzland Tales*, for all its epic setting and mythic themes, is at its heart the story of a single character and his progression from cowardice to self-sacrificial courage. My new novel, currently in the editing phase, places a small cast in the isolated, fantastical setting of a small coastal town and lets the actions of characters, both past and present, play out to their natural conclusions. This is what I meant when I placed plot and character on the two upward sides of the Story Triangulum, leaning against one another: characters shape and influence the plot, and the plot shapes and influences the characters.

In this episode, the first of three lessons on plot, I'm going to explore that core relationship – the way in which plot and character relate to one another to shape the course of your narrative. Primarily, I'm going to investigate the ways character wants and needs add momentum, direction, and purpose to your plot. Hopefully by the end of this lesson, you'll be able to figure out how to make your plot **more than just a series of random events, but a journey the reader can understand and enjoy.**

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In the last lesson, I discussed how to use the character wheel and value circle to design compelling arcs for your protagonist and supporting characters. Understanding this concept is a huge first step in writing character driven plots. Knowing where your characters begin and end, as well as the intermediary changes they need to undergo to naturally reach that point, allows you to design the plot around a series of events that will prompt those changes and the logical links between them.

This isn't to say that your plot should introduce a character's problem and then immediately run them through a series of direct actions to fix it. Remember, characters only change under conditions where they're challenged beyond the limits of their own experience and wisdom. People avoid the unfamiliar and frightening process of personal change unless they're certain

they've exhausted all other options. It follows, then, that plots designed to cause character change will be designed as **an escalating series of personal challenges that are extremely difficult to overcome, and not all of their attempts will be successful.**

But why would your characters even embark on this course of action if it's so difficult and dangerous? No one really embarks on a dangerous, high-risk journey just for the sake of improving themselves – not really. *Something* has to be waiting at the finish line to justify the grueling endurance race of the story. Whether that's a physical McGuffin or simply a future life free of some internal or external conflict that cannot continue, there must be a **primary character want** that drives them to undergo the journey.

As mentioned in the Planet Character Episode, Want is part of the Conscious Interior of the character – something they're cognizant of and think they understand. As it will drive the plot through the body of the story, it should be simple and clear – not necessarily obvious or basic, but something the reader can understand on an intuitive level. Most readers (though not all) will struggle to relate to a character who leaves a relatively stable, if unhappy, existence to pursue an abstract concept like self-actualization, understanding, or enlightenment. Those things may be what your character is actually looking for, but on the literal, conscious level of the character, they should be searching for something that's more physically or emotionally clear.

The reason this is so important is that, in order for the want to be the primary driver of plot, **it must be clear whether the want has been fulfilled or not.** Open-ended spiritual or intellectual goals are good to have, but they represent the kind of journey that is never really definitively completed. Stories, however, need a beginning, middle, and end. If the protagonist's goal is to find their Holy Grail (whatever that looks like), the reader knows, at each point in the story, whether they have it or not. When they don't, there are still steps that need to be undertaken. Once they do, and no one else is actively trying to take it away from them, the story is over. Or (as in the case of most Holy Grail stories) if they don't have it and no longer want to find it, their story is also complete. More on that later.

Let's look at *Blindsights* again. Sam's want is established immediately after the prologue – to protect Santa Lucia. The next few scenes, with Sam and Cyrus preparing for their arrival, show the reasons why this goal will be difficult to achieve: he's lost his sight and renounced violence, but still desires revenge. Once the bandits arrive and he realizes his old boss is with them, Sam first uses his rage to reawaken his warrior side, then allows it to distract him when he confronts Rueter. Because of this distraction, he fails to notice Dunn, the greater danger, and almost loses Cyrus as a result. The main plot ends as soon as Tolbert assures Sam (and the listener) that Cyrus will be alright, but the epilogue addresses the hanging story threads and shows Sam taking the final step towards his want. Believing his presence was what put Santa Lucia in danger in the first place, he decides that the best way to protect it is for him to leave.

However, while the practical mechanics of the plot are driven by Sam's want, his want is driven by **character needs**: the underlying, subconscious flaws that characters are trying to fix by pursuing their want. Going back to planet character, remember that wants arise from psychological and moral needs, which often function on a more emotive, fundamental level. This is where you, as the writer, put the big, abstract, personal changes you want your characters to undergo. Very few people (and even fewer characters) seek personal wholeness and social wholeness directly, instead pursuing more concrete goals that they think will bring them security or happiness. It's in the attempt to achieve those practical goals that those personal changes occur.

The need is best encoded in the subtext of the plot – shown in the things that aren't said by characters, but that the reader can tell they want to say; or in the things characters don't think of, but the audience realizes they're missing. **As the need is a flaw or lack within the characters, it is best shown by what *isn't* there.** And because the characters don't realize it's missing, they pursue something else that they believe is missing from their lives.

Let's look at *Return to the Echowood*. Rowan runs away from her wedding because she wants to escape the confusion of adult relationships for the simplicity of her childhood. Even though this is a more abstract goal, I think we've all been there and can understand where she's coming from. Additionally, her childhood

is physicalized in the fantastical realm of the Echowood, so returning to it becomes both practical and physical. However, what she *needs* – and what ultimately gives her the peace she’s looking for – is to integrate with her past (personalized as Lady Little Ash) and become a complete person, rather than dividing the self into discrete parts defined by trauma.

As *Echowood* is a psychological fantasy in a fairy tale setting, the conventions of genre allow and encourage the literalization of abstract concepts, and allow her need to be physically seen and confronted. However, the same idea can be seen in the other story episodes. In *Blindsights*, Sam wants to protect Santa Lucia, but that’s primarily because he needs to find peace after years of violence – a peace that Cyrus represents. In *Disquiet*, Anna Sheridan wants to find and defeat the ghost of Spirit Mountain Cave, but really needs to defeat her own ghosts of fear, anxiety, and inferiority. In *Worlds Apart*, Doctor Llewelyn wants to reestablish contact with the outside world, even though what she really lacks is the ability to meaningfully connect with other people.

Keep in mind, however, that while the structure of the plot is defined in many ways by the character’s attempts to achieve their wants, many of the best stories end with that want unfulfilled. Either the characters fail to achieve it after exhausting the limits of their strength, or their need, still unfulfilled, prevents them from seeing the way to achieve it. However, many strong stories end with the protagonist’s want ultimately unfulfilled and out of reach, but their internal need fulfilled. Oftentimes, the protagonist finally realizes what they were really looking for when they were chasing their goal, and recognize their want for what it was: a placebo that only addressed the symptoms, not the cause of their unhappiness. For instance, in *Return to the Echowood*, Rowan’s want – to escape her adult life – goes unmet, and she in fact chooses to return to her fiancé. This is because she was show her past self and realized that her life wasn’t perfect then, either. Because of this, she was able to incorporate her history honestly and move forward.

As you can see, the relationship between character want and need is often very close, and oftentimes the want is merely an external manifestation and literalization of the need. This

movement of the internal challenge into the external world is the way that new modes of being are tested, refined, and in the end, strengthened and solidified. **Plot is the crucible of character, where all that is untrue, weak, or ill-conceived is burned away by the trials of life.** By intentionally structuring themselves to eliminate all half-measures that characters might take to reach their wants, plots structured by the necessity of character need become compelling stories rather than flat reports of incidents and events. Do that much, and your readers will be able to understand and enjoy your story more clearly.

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Married to the concept of building plots by character need and want, however, is one of the oldest rules of storytelling. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, the age-old philosopher says that plots should first and foremost be constructed based on "what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity..." that is, based on realism within the world of the story. Again, realism doesn't mean stripping away all elements of the fantastical, extraordinary, or stylistic, but rather establishing and obeying the rules of your own story world in a way the reader can understand and follow. In the best stories, the rules of the story world reflect elements of reality that are understood by both the author and the reader.

With this in mind, remember that, in the same way that we're not the center of the universe, the reality of the story world should not only revolve around the protagonist. While every event in the plot occurs to and is viewed primarily through the eyes of the protagonist, the horizons of the story world can be expanded by having forces from outside the character web intervening in the story. Random accidents, mistakes, and unfortunate coincidences can help stack the deck against the protagonist and increase conflict in the plot. C.S. Lewis does this very well in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. On the surface they are very simple and straightforward plots, but Lewis deftly increases opposition in ways that feel realistic and unexpected: turning the geography of Narnia against the protagonists in *Prince Caspian*, making weather an ever-present danger in open country, or introducing hitherto unknown forces of opposition that keep the heroes and the readers guessing in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

“The course of true love never did run smooth,” said Shakespeare, and neither should the course of your plot. Keep the readers on their toes with unexpected, yet probable and necessary setbacks for your protagonists. All plots are constructed, to one degree or another, as a causally linked series of positive and negative events that lead characters towards and away from what they want. How difficult and indirect you want to make that journey really depends on your own intuition and the type of story you’re telling; but as a general rule, keep setbacks and struggles more prominent and frequent than steps forward, so long as you don’t cross the line between frustrating your characters and frustrating your readers. If it feels like your story is standing still for too long, you run the risk of burning out readers and losing their interest.

It’s a delicate balance, like everything in storytelling, and you have to keep a variety of factors in mind, from genre expectations and traditions to the general attention level of your target audience.

Above all, however, pay attention to your story and your characters when building your plot, and you’ll find your answer.

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With those two guiderails in place, let’s take off down the road of Character Driven Plots by breaking down my first novel, *The Gräzland Tales*. It may be a bit nepotistic, but this *is* my show, and

I know the book better than most. Also, it should be fairly obvious, but **major spoiler alert** if you haven’t read it. Seriously. I’m going to be discussing all the major plot beats from beginning to end. Now, if you’ve read it or you don’t care about spoilers – let’s begin.

The protagonist’s want is established in the first chapter, and it really doesn’t change throughout the course of the story: the prince is dead, and the farmer wants to scatter his ashes in the far north. However, while the object of the want remains consistent as it drives the plot forward, the farmer’s reasons for wanting it change as he moves towards fulfilling his need: to overcome personal fear and become truly selfless.

At first, he pursues his want in order to avoid punishment – he’s been ordered to scatter the ashes by the king, and he’s surrounded by armed guards in the capital city. However, once he’s out of the city and on the road, he pursues his want out of a

desire to return home – he lives nearby to the place he’s supposed to scatter the ashes, and he may as well take a slightly different road home. However, after he encounters a gang of outlaws performing dark magyk out on the frontier, he uses his goal as a way to escape and forget his fear, though it haunts his persistent nightmares on the road.

However, the stakes are raised at the beginning of Book 2. Captured by agents of the king’s church, the farmer again starts to pursue his mission in order to appease authority. However, he reluctantly forms an emotional bond with the priests and decides to work with them in order to achieve his goal. He has found a community that, while flawed and fairly authoritarian, shares his goal. In a weird way, he finds a temporary home among them. However, this all falls apart when the priests are attacked and killed by Ælfs, leaving the farmer as the sole survivor and the captive of a foreign power. Worst of all, however, the farmer loses the ashes, and starts to believe his want will never be fulfilled. However, as both his want and his need are still unfulfilled, the plot cannot be wrapped up.

In Book 3, the farmer turns inward, using his captivity in the ælfen city to study the prince’s heritage and interest in legends, discovering a new respect and understanding of the dead man he’s been carrying with him. In this exploration of the myths and legends of the story world, the farmer finally personalizes his want, even when he feels he’ll never accomplish it. His goal becomes moral and spiritual, rather than one based on fear and selfishness. When he’s unexpectedly freed at the beginning of Book 4 and the prince’s ashes are returned to him, he finally undertakes the mission with conviction. He’s on the threshold... but the final steps of change are still to come.

Book 4 is the most direct of the four volumes of the *Tales*, as the farmer, with the aid of old allies from all three books, races for the northern cliffs to fulfill his mission. Along the way, he finally learns the truth: the king was deceived by the old priests, who wanted to perform the same dark magyk he saw on the frontier in a bid to resurrect the prince and save the dynasty. However, the risks of such magyk mean that the prince might return corrupted, or that his return might destroy reality itself if done improperly. Worst of all, the ritual requires a willing human sacrifice – a role

the farmer was being groomed for. With renewed reason for speed, the farmer struggles on, trying to stay ahead of both ælfen pursuers and the king's army while dealing with his own rapidly failing health and recurring nightmares. Eventually, at the end of a final confrontation on the cliffs themselves, the farmer sacrifices himself to give his companion Magellus a chance to scatter the ashes without him. His want has shifted 180 degrees from something desired for personal safety and survival to something so selfless and universal that he doesn't even care who achieves it.

The story seemingly ends at this point, but in the epilogue, the farmer's son (who's been commenting on his father's journey throughout the entire book) discovers a new piece of evidence that reveals his father not only survived, but was able to scatter the ashes himself. His quest fulfilled, he spent the remainder of his short life in prison for disobeying the king, but helped educate his fellow prisoners, sharing his transformation from selfishness to personal transcendence and becoming a legend in his own right. His need – to realize that he's part of a world bigger than his own selfish concerns – has been revealed and fulfilled at the same time he achieved his material want, and his journey to that point gave the novel a structure that is sensible, realistic, and compelling to the reader.

While I made a lot of mistakes in the construction of this first novel, I feel like the bones of it – the plot, character, and story – are strong, and that it touch on something universal as a result. While it's told in an unusual way (written as the in-world diary of the main character), it still obeys the strongest tenants of storytelling: show, don't tell, make the stakes personal, and obey the logic of the story. With all of that in mind, your own plot structures – flawed as they may be – will be strong enough to support even the trickiest stories.

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Thank you for listening to this episode of Homestead on the Corner! Today's character-plot collation was written and produced by Trevor Van Winkle, with music from the extraordinary Lauren Baker.

Want to see how random, unexpected events can reshape the course of your journey through life? You can find all that and a box of cats on Twitter and Instagram, where I'm known to appear every once in a while at [trevor_vw](#). If you enjoyed this show, please share it out, and be sure to check out [homesteadonthecorner.com](#) for extra content, outtakes, and more info about the show.

Thank you so much to our very first Patreon supporter, Shirley Casperson! If you enjoyed this lesson and want to help us keep the lights on, consider supporting *Homestead on the Corner* on Patreon as a monthly donor.

Next episode... well, let's just say there might be a spooky surprise coming up. Be sure to subscribe so you don't miss it, and please rate and review us on Apple Podcast! It really does help get this show out to more people.

Well, that's about all for now. From the Homestead on the Corner, have a great day, and keep writing.