

Lesson 20 – Act Two: Subplots and Somebodies

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

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This weekend, I had the privilege of taking part in a virtual reading of the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* by Tom Stoppard. It's a brilliantly funny, absurd, and occasionally touching play about two of the most forgettable of characters in all of Shakespeare: the mildly incompetent spies who first try to figure out why Hamlet is going mad, then try to lead him to England to be executed. There isn't much to them in the original text, and they're perhaps best known for the line in the final scene that gives Stoppard's play its name. The script takes full advantage of the fact that we know the ending from the beginning and so, in a way, do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They exist in a weird nether space between the scenes of *Hamlet*, philosophizing about this strange, semi-permanent existence they both share: where they don't remember anything before the beginning of the play, aren't sure if they've ever cut their toenails, and regularly get their own names mixed up. In the end, they find themselves trapped by the momentum of the story, robbed of all agency, and killed per the demands of the centuries old tragedy they're part of. It's a wonderful play, and one that intentionally demonstrates the weird way a lot of writers really treat their subplot characters.

Oftentimes, we're tempted to treat supporting characters in our stories as non-existent when they're not interacting with the protagonist – like their world freezes in time between their scenes, and they only really came into being at the beginning of the narrative. More than that, we often end up treating them with less care and finesse than any of the main characters. Since they're not in the story very often, they become caricatures or strawmen, interchangeable and undefined besides a bit of physical characterization. Oftentimes, they only come into being because the story needs *someone* to do *something*, so we pick the first trope that comes to mind and give it a funny name to make it memorable. Hence – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Stoppard was making an absurdist point about life, death, and storytelling in his play, and in the course of most narratives, his approach of having the supporting characters appear between major dramatic moments to comment on their existence wouldn't really work.

However, the play still makes a great point. When they're in the scenes with the main characters, Ros and Guil have purpose, direction, and the ability to slip into iambic pentameter effortlessly. When they're alone, however, they become uncertain, neurotic, and bumbling as they try and figure out what just happened and what they're *supposed* to do next. What Stoppard does is show the contrast between the way most supporting characters are written (as a function) and the way that all the people we meet in daily life really are. Every one of them has a history, a desire, their own plotline and character arc. **Everyone is the hero of their own story.** Even the most dependent, neurotic person you've ever met thinks of their life as something that happens to them. They're the only constant. Everything that they have ever experienced happened with them in the room, occupying the center of that memory.

They may not think of themselves as heroic, or even particularly important or in control of their situation, but they have the final say on what each moment of their life means to them. They grow. They change. They are the protagonist of their own life, whether they believe it or not.

And the same should be true of all your characters, no matter how small.

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In this episode, I'm going to be talking about a wide variety of character types and functions, from allies and enemies to subplot and foil characters, under the blanket term "supporting characters." The main reason for this distinction is that, at this point in your narrative, your protagonist and antagonist already are (or should be) well developed and thought out, with clearly defined personalities and arcs. For this reason, they're not what we're concerned about today. What we want to talk about is how to elevate the rest of your character web to the point where they feel as fully realized, even if they have less time on the screen or space on the page. While they might just begin as a means to draw out different sides to the protagonist, they shouldn't stay that way forever – not in a really good story. To leave them that way is to reduce your narrative to one or two real people walking around in a world of life-sized photo cutouts. They might look like people, but they're two dimensional – and if you put any narrative weight on them, they'll collapse right away.

Now I'm not saying that you need to spend a year figuring out the names and backstories of every person in your setting. In some special cases where the setting is small and intentionally limited it might not be a bad idea, but even lore master Tolkien, king of worldbuilding, didn't figure out the personal histories of everyone in Minas Tirith in *The Return of the King*. The soldiers Pippin interacts with, however, are given families, backstories, and individualized personalities. For another example, when the clone troopers first appeared in *Star Wars*, they were nameless, faceless soldiers, but when *The Clone Wars* series rolled

around, they became individuated characters with nicknames, hopes and dreams, and varying opinions on the war they were created to fight.

How do you decide when someone in a story ticks over from “background detail” to “character?” Well in Hollywood, that transition is pretty clearly defined by when an extra becomes a “bit part” by speaking lines or interacting directly with the leads. This is a very important distinction for the production company, since playing a bit part pays quite a bit more than being an extra, and they don’t want to part with any more money than they need to... Production is already ludicrously expensive. Even so, I’ve heard of a few actor friends getting upgraded on the spot when their performance made an impression on the director. Sometimes, entire film plots hinge on the actions or words of bit parts, as they deliver messages or set chains of events in motion before disappearing forever. And sometimes, they become memorable figures just for who they are, despite not really doing anything relevant to the plot. One of my favorite things that the internet has ever done is taking a random background elf in *The Fellowship of the Ring* and naming him Figwit (an acronym for “Frodo is grea... WHO IS THAT?”). A similar thing happened with *The Force Awakens* and the random riot stormtrooper fans quickly dubbed TR-8R.

Of course, those two weren’t really characters in those films, though they have since been given actual names and backstories in sequels and licensed novels. But I think it proves something important here: each and every person in the background of your narrative has their own story. It shouldn’t be more interesting that the one you’re telling, but it is there, and to them, it’s the most important narrative in the universe.

It’s especially true in film, where every bit player and extra needs an actual person to be physically present on set (at least for the time being – if CGI extras keep getting cheaper and more convincing, that might change). It’s true in podcasts, too: I try to minimize the number of bit parts in my scripts just to simplify production, but there’s almost always a few here and there. Even so, asking an actor to come in and voice them means you need to give them motivation, personality, and a little bit of backstory to make the performance work. At the very least, you need to stand back and give the actor room to fill their part with some degree of identity. That’s just how actors work: they need to know where their lines are coming from emotionally in order to actually deliver them with any degree of realism. If you give them a character who just delivers exposition with no personality to back it up, then they’ll do their best to liven it up – but they can only do so much.

This need becomes less apparent in non-performance mediums, but it’s no less vital to the integrity of the overall story. Writing is quite often a solitary exercise – even in TV writing, the writers’ room often comes up with ideas together, then hands them off to one person who goes off and puts them together alone. It’s easier to just write the bit parts as flat and function rather than develop them into interesting characters, and so that’s often how they end up. It’s even tempting to think that you don’t have enough space to really develop them in your narrative,

so why even bother? But here's the thing: a flat, functional bit part takes up just as much real estate as having a character arrive in a flash of brilliance before disappearing again. In Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett's *Good Omens*, the Chattering Order of St. Beryl only appears in the first chapter for a couple of pages, and yet their quirky, bumbling behavior coupled with the fact that they're a satanic order of nuns trying to bring about the end of the world made them utterly memorable, even if they only have a handful of lines between them. It also meant that Gaiman and Pratchett can bring one of them back later to deliver another vital bit of information in a way that further develops her character. Did they waste literary real estate developing these ancillary characters? I don't imagine there are many readers who would say so, and I certainly don't.

Giving your side characters this kind of thought is the first step in making sure they are actually characters. Think them through in the same way you would your main characters: what makes them tick? Where did they come from? What do they want? What contradictions and paradoxes will make them more interesting to the reader? **Mine out these details until you have a solid picture, and then find ways to communicate it efficiently. If they're only going to appear once, then make it count.** Not only will this make the character more interesting, it will make what you need them to say or do more memorable to the audience, as it is now subconsciously attached to an interesting and compelling side character. Not only that, but it helps to strengthen the story world overall. Like I said, if your supporting characters are flat and functional, then your story world will feel artificial and false: like your main characters are walking around a set. Readers are good at extrapolating though, and if the characters the protagonist meets are well realized and compelling, then they extend that the rest of the people walking by on the street. Going back to the example of *Star Wars*, the cantina scene works so well because of Luke's interactions with the bit parts: the bartender with his odd prejudice against droids and the two ruffians at the bar who clearly have an ego and are willing to fight for it. They feel like real characters with histories, opinions, and personalities, and as a result all the weird and wonderful aliens around the bar begin to take on new life. We begin to wonder what their stories might be, and with a franchise as big as *Star Wars*, most of those stories have actually been written now.

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Okay, you might say, Develop the supporting characters to make them... you know, actual characters. But what about their stories? What about Subplots?

I've skirted around this question for a while now as I focused on strengthening the central plotline of your narrative. This was partially because I was unsure of the answer, but it was also kind of intentional: after all, without a strong central through-line for your story, the narrative falls apart. Again, your *Premise* is the core of your story, and

the central plotline should be the expression of that premise in plot and character. The protagonist and antagonist embody the thesis and antithesis, come into conflict, and emerge with a synthesis through personal change. That, oversimplified though it may be, is one of the most basic expressions of storytelling. But as anyone who's ever tried to write a full-length novel, screenplay, or long-form series knows, there's usually not enough material there to fill the entire narrative without getting repetitive or dragging the conflict out. Just as readers know a deus-ex-machina ending as the work of an author who doesn't know how to wrap up their narrative, they'll spot a padded-out plotline and realize the author doesn't know how to keep it going.

This is where subplots come in. **A subplot, to overgeneralize, is a secondary plot that is directly connected to or reflects the theme and premise of the main plot.** Adding a subplot that actually fits into the narrative is often quite difficult because it has to contain its own three act structure while also fitting into the overall super-structure of the master narrative. According to Robert McKee's *Story*, a subplot either has to, quote, "contradict the controlling idea (McKee's term for premise) of the central plot and thus enrich the film with irony," or, quote, "resonate the controlling idea of the central plot and enrich the film with variations on a theme." End quote. It makes sense, right? Your subplot is *subordinate* to the main story – it is not its own thing. If you just took the text of it out of the main narrative, then it probably wouldn't stand up on its own. It needs to be connected to the premise of the main plot, and there are only two ways to do that without just saying the same thing twice. You either have to create variations on the theme, or you have to contradict it.

John Truby offers a slightly more pragmatic perspective on subplots in *The Anatomy of Story*, where he says, quote: "The subplot is used to contrast how the hero and a second character deal with the same problem in slightly different ways." End quote. This is one very strong method for creating compelling subplots. Essentially, you take the protagonist and another character and you put them through what is essentially the same challenge – different specifics usually, but same general stakes and level of conflict. If the subplot character ends up failing to reach their goal before the end of the narrative, then it can increase tension for the protagonist. We now know that they can fail, and we've seen what failure costs. But even if they don't, the different ways the two characters approach and solve the same problems individuates them through their actions – **showing rather than telling how these two people are different.**

For instance, *The Godfather Part II* tells the stories of Michael Corleone and his father, Vito, in parallel. Michael's is the main plot, showing his continued descent into darkness until he's willing to kill his own brother to protect his own interests as Godfather. The subplot tracks his father's slow rise to power through theft, murder, and fear, resonating the central theme of the film while also providing contrasts and comparisons between the two. Both are willing and able to take violent

revenge on those who have hurt them, but while Vito killed the mafioso who murdered his family, Michael goes further, killing members of his own family when they betray him. By the end, Vito still seems to have at least part of his soul intact, surrounded by his family and respected by his community, while Michael seems to be completely gone as he watches Fredo die without any hint of remorse, alone and totally isolated from the world.

In long form series, subplots often runs through the entire season, appearing for a few minutes in each episode before becoming the main plot of the season finale. For instance, *Doctor Who* Series 2 has a subplot about the fictional Torchwood Institute. It's frequently namedropped throughout the series as a shadowy organization working in the background of the episodic stories, but only fully appears in *The Army of Ghosts*, the first part of the season finale. The overall premise of Series 2 is that the Doctor's efforts to protect all of space and time leaves collateral damage that he doesn't try to fix, and eventually, even he has to face the consequences of his actions. His flippant disregard for history and reckless interference in the episode *Tooth and Claw* lead to the institute's formation in 1879, and in 2007 he loses his companion as a direct result of the organization's efforts to protect Britain from extraterrestrial threats. In this case (and in many other long-format, ongoing series), the "monster of the week" type stories all treat their plots as central within the episode while using the series-long arc as an ongoing subplot to tie them all together. Then, in the season finale, the subplot is revealed as the key to that season's master plot, giving the entire run of episodes a cohesive through-line. *The Magnus Archives* is a strong example of this in podcasting, and, without giving away too many spoilers, I've already began several subplots in *The Sheridan Tapes* that will pay off in the season finale.

However, in shorter, standalone stories, there often isn't enough room for full subplots. Most of the story episodes for Season 1 of this podcast don't have real subplots, and for good reason: trying to squeeze one full story into a 20-50 minute episode is difficult enough without trying to cram in subplots as well. Instead, most strong short stories focus on one central premise, plotline, and character set, and most of the time, that's a good thing. There are ways to incorporate subplots, but it often splits narrative focus away from the protagonist, which is the last thing you want to do when you're trying to produce a singular effect. But even if you don't have subplots in your particular story, you should try your best to have a fully developed supporting cast within the main plot, surrounding the protagonist.

In short, the decision of whether or not to use subplots, along with how you chose to use them, depends largely on the type of story you're telling, your specific medium, and your premise. A lot of very good stories keep the focus solely on one plot line and mine it out for all its worth. The vast majority of modern films have one central plotline, usually with a romantic subplot thrown in for good measure (which gets annoying quickly if it doesn't actually resonate or contradict the main

theme in a compelling way, so be forewarned). At the other end of the spectrum, some stories don't even have a central plot, but a lot of smaller subplots all linked to a central thesis and occasionally interconnecting. Robert McKee calls this a multiplot story, and John Truby calls it an "explosive" story pattern, with multiple storylines happening all at once in different places. *Pulp Fiction*, the play *Almost, Maine*, and many other anthology-type stories follow this type of non-linear pattern, though the incidents should be arranged and edited to create a cohesive structure, with each plotline having its own beginning, middle, and end within a larger, narrative-spanning arc.

This is a good point to remind you to be careful with your use of subplots. **Each subplot has to have its own structure, and it has to exist logically in the overall structure of the narrative.** For every subplot you add, you either have to find a new inciting incident or link it to the protagonist's inciting incident in a compelling way. Each subplot character has to make a decision to cross the threshold on their own, confront their antagonist, go through the road of trials, and come out the other side either changed or destroyed. Missing any of these components can make the plot feel incomplete or unsatisfying and reduce the overall impact of the story. There is a risk in trying to get fancy with your storytelling, but there is also a chance to increase the thematic resonance of your narrative, deepen the themes, and give your overall plot a greater sense of momentum.

But don't take my word for it. As I always say, listen to your story. If it needs a subplot (or two, or three), it will tell you. **Structure isn't some outside thing you compress your ideas down into until they fit – it emerges from your story as an organic part of it.** It's just as much a part of the overall narrative as the characters and world you've created. Take a good long look at your story and decide if it will be better served by a tight, single plotline storyline or a twisting, sprawling rollercoaster of a narrative, or something in between. It doesn't have to be one or the other to be interesting, important, or compelling – there are great stories told in every way, even if they break a couple rules. Do what's right for you, your story, and your readers, and you'll find the structure there.

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Thank you for listening to this episode of Homestead on the Corner! Today's subplot suppositions were written and produced by Trevor Van Winkle, and featured music from Lauren Baker and Jesse Haugen.

I'm going to be taking a bit of a hiatus from these lesson episodes through the month of June to refocus and refresh, but in the meantime check out "The Sheridan Tapes," Homestead on the Corner's new weekly horror podcast! To find out where to listen to it, head over to thesheridantapes.com. And in the meantime, follow us on Instagram and Twitter @trevor_VW for updates on both of our shows, and check

out Patreon.com/homesteadcorner if you want to support our little production team.

Homestead on the Corner will return for the rest of season 2 on Wednesday, July 1st with more lessons on the three-act structure, character development, and general storytelling tools, but... that's about all for now. From the Homestead on the Corner, have a great month, and keep writing.