

## Lesson 27 – Act Three: Renewal

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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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As you approach the end of your story – the place where the words and images and sounds must finally come to an end – the arc of your characters and your story as a whole becomes more important than ever. After all, you're quickly running out of pages or screen time to demonstrate the full meaning of your premise. With the central plot wrapped up and the momentum of the narrative slowing with every passing second, you need to move quickly to deliver a full, complete ending to your story that leaves the reader or audience feeling satisfied and fulfilled.

But on the other hand, you definitely don't want to rush this moment. This is your last chance as an author to state your case and leave your audience with the emotions and insights you want this story to communicate. After all, the last image, paragraph, or scene of your narrative tends to color everything that came before it. It's what your reader walks away with, and your last chance to deliver on or subvert their expectations. Trust me, this moment is not to be wasted.

But the question is not really whether to use it or not, but how to use it.

As we talked about in the last episode, the third act of your story is about showing, rather than telling, the ways in which your protagonist and their world has been changed by the course of the narrative. We spoke about how and why to return them to the ordinary world of act one, but we didn't really discuss what they will do there. After all, if character is demonstrated through action, then they must *do* something in order to really show how they have changed. And this action will preferably be one undertaken within a conflict with stakes, as decisions made with nothing on the line don't really tell us anything about character.

But how are you supposed to do this when the central conflict of the story has already been resolved? What is this source of third act conflict and stakes that makes the protagonists final actions seem earned and genuine, rather than being trite statements of value forced on them by the author? I think we all know how it feels when a storyteller decides to put the statements of change into the mouths of their characters in

the third act, even if they've already demonstrated that change at the climax. As Robert McKee says in *Story*, quote: "characters with lucid self-knowledge, those reciting self-explanatory dialogue meant to convince us that they are who they say they are, are not only boring but phony. The audience knows that people rarely, if ever, understand themselves, and if they do, they're incapable of complete and honest self-explanation." End quote.

**True character is only truly revealed in action through conflict with genuine stakes for the character.** And today, we're going to talk about the ways in which true, changed character is effectively revealed at the end of your narrative.

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The first way of demonstrating the arc of your characters in the final act is one that largely sidesteps this issue. Rather than trying to generate a new situation with conflict and stakes after the primary force of antagonism is dispatched, **this technique uses the resolution to show the effects of the protagonist's actions and choices within the climax through the story world and supporting cast.** This technique has several key advantages, not the least of which is that it strictly limits the third act to its primary function of resolving the story and delivering emotional payoff and closure to the audience. By structuring the third act in such a way, **you remove the need for vital, character-defining actions and choices to be made in a situation with lower stakes and lesser conflicts.** Within a strong and dynamic structure, the stakes of a story escalate until the climax, and then unwind only after the emotional arc of the story is complete. This, unfortunately, conflicts with the way in which true character is revealed and the need to show character change and growth, creating a problem for writers attempting to show how their protagonist has been genuinely changed by their experiences within the story.

However, if you place your character's final choice or revelation moment in the climax and ensure that it clearly shows their growth from the inciting incident, you can sidestep this issue and keep the third act short and sweet, focusing only on the effects of that choice rather than trying to deliver another character-defining choice. This technique is widely used in film, television, and theatre for its ability to keep the audience engaged with the story until the end, keeping the third act as brief as possible. For instance, *Star Wars* places this character change moment for Luke Skywalker at the end of the battle of Yavin, as he listens to the voice of his mentor and places his trust in the unseen force to save the day. Almost as soon as he does this, Han Solo reappears, saving him from Darth Vader and completing his story arc from self-centered loner to someone who cares and fights for his friends. These choices revealing how their characters have truly changed, Luke destroys the Death Star with ease, and the final moments of the film focus on their heroes' welcome and celebration at the rebel base. For an opposing example, *Romeo and Juliet* end with the final,

tragic choice of Juliet, deciding that she can't live without love and killing herself. The play then shifts focus to their surviving family members finding the horrible scene and ending their feud as a result.

In both stories, the consequences of these characters' decisions ripple out into the wider story world and character web, and the remainder of the third act is spent focusing on how their growth, positive or negative, effects the world: healing it, or causing more pain and chaos. Now that's not to say that this ripple-effect structure can't be used in stories where character growth and change continues into the final act – it's often used in those stories, and to great effect. I'm simply saying that in stories structured to end the character arc directly at the plot climax, it is necessary to show the effect of that arc clearly and effectively within the wider framework of the narrative.

The second technique takes a different approach to the paradox of conflict-driven action after the primary conflict is resolved: **it brings the central conflict back for a brief moment in act three to allow the changed protagonist a chance to demonstrate their growth.** This is a less common technique and something of a subversion of expectations in most genres, but it is no less effective than the first technique when used well. Essentially, this technique depends on the principles of contrast to show how the protagonist's arc was still incomplete at the climax, but through a final confrontation, is completed at a moment after the primary plot's conclusion. This often occurs in stories with more complex, multi-leveled conflicts and multiple antagonists, as well as with stories that separate the protagonist's character arc from the main plotline. The clearest example of this is *The Return of the King* and the Scourging of the Shire. Having ultimately failed to let go of the one ring at Mount Doom, Frodo returns to the Shire to find it taken over by the wizard Saruman and his henchmen. Having defeated the occupying force, Frodo makes his final choice in conflict, telling the other Hobbits not to kill the wizard but rather to show him mercy. However, this fails and Saruman is killed by his lackey Wormtongue in a fit of rage. This final choice makes one thing abundantly clear: while Frodo at Mount Doom wanted to hold onto the ring and its corrupting power, now he just wants an end to the death and violence that has surrounded him since he first left the Shire. This character revelation then plays out into one final choice – one that plays on a different level of conflict, and one we will discuss in a moment.

Another slightly surprising example of this technique is *Hot Fuzz*, which has one of the film's antagonists return unexpectedly after the primary antagonists have been defeated, further demonstrating the growth and bond between the two leads by allowing Danny to make the final character-defining choice in conflict and take a bullet for Angel. While on the one hand, this choice was clearly made to subvert the expected story structure for comedy, it also occurs to give Danny's character arc within the film a definitive conclusion, while the final character choice for Angel occurred at the end of the crisis, when he decided to return to Sandford to confront the Neighborhood Watch.

The third and final technique I'm going to discuss today is slightly more difficult to pull off, but can be very effective in the right story. In this technique, rather than focusing on the main conflict or the overarching plot and trying to extend it into the third act, **a new or existing conflict with a distinctly different focus or level of stakes becomes the focus of the resolution.** For instance, if the primary conflict of the story was external and physical, then the third act might shift to pre-existing internal conflicts for the protagonist as the fuel for further change. This is what happens at the final ending of *The Return of the King* – once Saruman is defeated and life goes back to normal, Tolkien makes the bold choice to dig into the psychological trauma and hurt Frodo has undergone in his journey and genuinely address it. The source of antagonism shifts from dark lords and evil wizards to PTSD and his own emotional scars, leading to his ultimate decision to leave Middle-Earth and seek healing beyond the sea. In his own words, quote "But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them." End quote. While it might not initially seem like it, this is a choice in conflict with stakes: Frodo is in conflict with his own desire to remain in the Shire, and his relationships with his friends at stake. It's a different level of conflict, and while the stakes might be objectively lower (the wellbeing of a single person vs. the future of all Middle-Earth), this is Frodo's story, and, as with most things in story, the more personal the stakes, the more profound they feel to the reader.

A similar shift happens in the third act of *Les Misérables*. With Inspector Javert dead and the June Rebellion ending in tragedy, the overarching conflict of the story has ended well before the actual end of the novel. However, Jean Valjean's arc towards redemption is still not completed. Even though he has given up his selfish desire to keep Cosette isolated and sheltered, he still has one last thing to give up for her, and decides to leave before she and Marius wed to protect them from his past. This final sacrifice for her leaves him alone and slowly dying, but Victor Hugo allows us to see them reunited in a way that doesn't rob his choice of impact and allows the interpersonal conflict between them to be resolved in a cathartic way.

As you can see from these examples, this kind of ending most often occurs in works of greater complexity, with multiple levels and types of conflict working in parallel. This typically means that all conflicts can't be realistically or satisfyingly wrapped up at the climax, as they can be in simpler stories – there simply isn't enough time for all of them.

However, when required to use this technique by the story you're telling, be sure to remember that **true character is only truly revealed in action through conflict with genuine stakes for the character.** Without some kind of conflict, be it personal, internal, interpersonal, or external, you cannot reveal genuine character in a way that the audience will believe. Choices made with nothing on the line mean nothing: they have no consequences, and are thus as meaningless as a

person's Starbucks order. And when you're working to create one final demonstration of the growth and change your protagonist has undergone in the course of your narrative, the last thing you want it to feel like is trite.

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Knowing *how* to show your character's internal growth is only one half of the equation, however. While the technical know-how is absolutely helpful, **you as the author need to know first and foremost exactly what changes your character has undergone in the course of the story and why.** While this seems obvious, it needs to be intentionally planned and thought through by the author rather than assumed. This may not happen in the first draft, but once the arc of your character is found, it is absolutely necessary that you know exactly what has changed about your character and what brought it about. Whether it's a radical change from cowardice to courage brought about by the character's sense of justice being repeatedly challenged, or a more subtle shift from loneliness to contentedness brought about by the simple actions of a friend, you need to know how your protagonist will grow in order to show it clearly in your narrative.

This is especially important in the final choices your characters make in the narrative, as they should be a clear demonstration of that change. As Blake Snyder says in *Save the Cat*, quote: "the final image in a movie is the opposite of the opening image. It is your proof that change has occurred and that it's real." End quote. While the language is hyper-specific to film and overly generalized, the point still stands: the contrast between the characters at the beginning of the narrative and the end of it is one of the clearest and most effective way to show real, genuine change. **And only by knowing how and why your characters change can you clearly and effectively demonstrate that change to your audience.** If you don't know what specifically has changed about your protagonist since the first page, or if you can only describe it in generic language such as "they get better" or "they learn to grow up," then you may have a problem. Like most things in storytelling, you're arguing a specific premise with every authorial choice, word, and image, and if a key piece of that argument – the way in which your protagonist grows – is not specifically framed and effectively argued, then the central arc of your narrative will crumble, bereft of any real meaning.

Instead of saying "they get better," try to isolate what central flaw or need was hurting them at the beginning of the narrative. It doesn't have to be something cliché or simplistic – it just has to be specific. For instance, a young-adult character might be dealing with a persistent ennui that set in after they saw a dead deer as a child and never really left them. Okay – how does that hurt them? What could they be missing out on that would demonstrate they're not living a full and complete life? Perhaps you could show that people think it's utterly ridiculous that they still feel this way, or that they try to tell them that it's just a part of their personality, or even that they're just lying about their

unhappiness to get attention. Perhaps they've become misanthropic as a result, pushing people away and hurting others just as much as themselves. Okay – now you have a clear starting point of an arc. There are a million different directions you could go from here, each resulting in a different overall premise for your story. Perhaps through simple acts of kindness by strangers, the care of a few good friends or family members, or a near-death experience at the climax, they realize that even though life is short, there is still much to enjoy about it, and they decide to start living again. Now you have a start and an end point to your arc: a journey of growth and change, and the overall shape of your narrative. Now – what precisely changed about this protagonist between the beginning of the story and the end?

Look to the premise being argued here: *life is short and sad, but it is worth living nonetheless*. The thesis of this protagonist (*life is meaningless because it ends*) and the antithesis those around them try to push (*life is always wonderful and worth living*) have fused into a synthesis with a greater level of truth than either statement alone. The protagonist didn't buy into the naïve "life is good" ideals being pushed on them, but they don't feel the life is meaningless anymore either. So how do you most effectively contrast this more complicated perspective with their initial attitudes? Well, like all things in story: by revealing character through action in conflict with stakes, and by showing clear contrast in the character's action at the beginning and end of their arc. The simplest solution is to have the protagonist face the same problem twice: once at the beginning, when they are unable to face it, then again at the end of their arc, when they are finally able to defeat it. It does not always have to be exactly the same, or even terribly similar, but it should challenge them in the same way and clearly demonstrate their growth and change in a believable, earned way.

Now, to return to the question of ongoing, serialized storytelling a bit (because it's all I can really think of right now, as I head into the season finale of *The Sheridan Tapes*): In the same way that the positioning of the third act return depends on what level of the story your overall arc relies on (whether individual stories/episodes, seasons arcs, or a series-long story), the end point of your character's arc should be determined by the primary storytelling unit of your story. In other words, if your story is primarily about a bunch of little stories without much bearing on one another, the arc of your characters will probably be contained in the individual episodes, with each including a moment that clearly shows how your character has changed. On the other hand, in a long-form serial, that primary signpost of change will probably come sometime during the series finale, when the protagonist makes a choice they absolutely would not or could not have made at the beginning of the series. For instance, Walter White finally accepts his own death at the end of *Breaking Bad* after seeing all the harm that his machinations have caused, something the obsessive and petty Walt at the beginning of the series distinctly chose to not do when he started his drug empire.

That's not to say, however, that if your story is primarily driven by an overarching character arc, you should only show that change at the very end of the narrative. Rather, it's a matter of showing that character's growth throughout the series as a series of smaller arcs that build upon one another. In many ways, when telling a strong, ongoing story, the structure is fractal, with the individual parts containing the elements of the series as a whole. This is a difficult thing to do, and requires a great deal of pre-planning to make sure episodes and seasons organically and naturally build on top of one another in a way that feels earned and well-paced, but it is immensely satisfying when a writer or showrunner manages to pull it off.

Wherever you place that demonstrative moment in the character arc, however, just remember what I've kept saying over and over again this episode: **True character is only truly revealed in action through conflict with genuine stakes for the character. Show, don't tell, how and why your characters change, and think through that arc of change carefully and intentionally.** These fundamental techniques are just as important whether you're writing micro-fiction or a ten-season television series, and learning how to utilize them well will take you far in your own journey of growth as a writer.

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Thank you for listening to this episode of Homestead on the Corner! Today's character growth conundrum was written and produced by Trevor Van Winkle, and featured music from Lauren Baker.

Want to see me use these ideas in a real live story? Our new fiction podcast "The Sheridan Tapes" is now available on all podcasting platforms! To find out where to listen to it, head over to [thesheridantapes.com](http://thesheridantapes.com) for show links and more info. In the meantime, follow us on Instagram and Twitter @trevor\_VW for updates on both of our shows, and check out [Patreon.com/homesteadcorner](https://www.patreon.com/homesteadcorner) if you want to support our little production team.

Next episode, we finally come to the end of our journey through the three act structure and bring it all together into one complete story. New episodes of this podcast are released every other Wednesday at 2pm Pacific Standard Time, so be sure to subscribe so you don't miss it.

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