Creating Real Drama Through "the Premise"

by Phil Cosmo

All dramatic stories have one premise. In fiction, the premise is the conclusion of a fictive argument. That argument is posed and answered in the story. For instance a premise that "family loyalty leads to a life of crime." would find a story that attempted and succeeded at validating this premise. Such was the premise for Mario Puzo's The Godfather.

All stories have one (and just one) premise. In Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea", the story sets out to prove the premise that "courage leads to redemption." In the Walt Disney Classic "Cinderella" the premise that "Dreams will lead to reality despite jealousy of others." becomes validated when Cinderella's foot dovetails perfectly into the glass slipper. Her stepmother's face contorts, there is a gasp but nothing else can change the fact that Cinderella will marry the prince.

In his book "How to Write a Damn Good Novel." James Frey discusses the necessity to create non vague premises. Vagueness creates for dull hum drum works that fail to capture the central core argument of the author. For instance, the premise "war is bad" is too vague. A story that was set out to prove this premise would start with buildings being blown up and people dying, families being torn apart, military personnel having personal guilt over killing, etc... you can go one almost indefinitely and the net result would be a rather loose story. Instead of "war is bad" you could develop the premise that "war transforms cowards into brave heroes." This one is more promising. It isn't too general but instead draws on a particular premise.

In Lajos Egri's book, The Art of Dramatic Writing (1946), Egri describes the structure of a good premise as one that contains an element of character which through conflict leads to a conclusion. This structure ensures that all central aspects of the story are interwoven in the premise.

In the premise "war transforms cowards into brave heroes." the character is "a coward", the conflict is "war" and the conclusion is an ultimate transformation to a hero. Likewise you can formulate your premise based on character, and the conclusion for that character. Then you carefully insert the conflict that will drive that character to the conclusion. For instance if you were writing about a banker that ends up robbing the bank (from the inside) you could imagine a number of conflicts. What if the banker was a nice person and it was out of character to do this? Now the conflict takes on a more dramatic tone. Perhaps the bankers must pay for a child's live saving surgery (conflict). Perhaps the banker has a chronic gambling problem and needs money. What conclusion would befall such a banker? Perhaps the banker will loose everything (wife, job, freedom). Now armed with the basic elements you can construct your premise "Chronic gambling loses out to everything in the end".

As an exercise you should go through the writing works you have done and attempt to determine the premise of each one. See if the premise was vague or non vague

and how did that fair over the entire work as a whole? Does it touch on the character, the conflict and the conclusion?

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