

Week Seven: The Inciting Incident or Catalyst

Reading: None (currently)

Character Review

Your main character is your protagonist, your hero. (Tip: to make your hero deep or interesting, make them a reluctant hero—someone who does not think they are right for the job.)

Your hero has to *want* something. It must be *clear* and *visual*. When actors have trouble with a scene, they ask: what does my character want? When you get writer's block, ask: what does my character want? This will tell you what comes next.

There is a difference between want and need. (In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy *wants* to go home, but she *needs* to learn the value of home before she is ready to go back.) Often, the hero is unaware of his need. Often, what the hero wants is bad for him. *Want* drives the plot; *need* drives the theme. *Want* is blocked by the antagonist (or obstacle: person, situation, nature); *need* is blocked by the protagonist's character flaws.

The Inciting Incident or Catalyst

The catalyst is when the main characters become actively involved in the plot. Something happens that spurs them to action and begins their journey. Remember that every sentence—every word—should reveal something either about the character or about the plot. In other words, there needs to be some kind of movement, either in the plot or in the development of the characters. A catalyst starts that ball rolling.

The catalyst also moves your character from the normal into the unknown. "Intrusion usually changes everything that can be changed" (David Ball). The catalyst sets your character on his quest—but your character is not on the journey yet. He is probably *close*—but you want to give the reader a chance to understand that every step along the way is important. So the catalyst, the movement from the balance into the unbalance, the choice of the character to accept the quest—this should have its own space. Don't rush to the quest.

Classic Structure

"In the first act you put your characters up a tree; in the second act you shoot things at them; in the third act you get them down." – George S. Kaufman

In-class exercise:

Going in a "circle," have one student provide an adjective (e.g. optimistic), the next student provide a character (e.g. barber), the next student provide a want (e.g. paying customer), the next student provide a need (e.g. friendship). Then take three brainstormed suggestions on what the inciting incident could be for his story—what propels this optimistic barber ostensibly on a quest for a paying customer but really on a quest for friendship?

Homework

Write two more pages of your story. Make sure your inciting incident has occurred by this point. What choice does it lead your hero to make?