

The Three-Act Structure in Storytelling

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All stories are told in three acts, whether it's a joke, a campfire tale, a novel or Shakespeare. The ancient Greeks figured that out while they were laying the foundations of all storytelling, on or off the stage.

Sure, there may be many act breaks written into a script, or none at all mentioned in a novel, but the three acts are there. They have to be. It's fundamental to storytelling.

Here is the 'just the facts' version of this.

The first act introduces the protagonist, some of the major themes of the story, some of the principle characters, possibly the antagonist, and some idea of the crisis around which the story pivots. The first act ends at a turning point moment where the protagonist has to face the decision to go deeper into the story or turn around and return to zero. Often this choice is beyond the protagonist's control.

In the second act the main plot is developed through action, and subplots are presented in order to provide insight into the meaning of the story, the nature of the characters, and the nature of the crisis. Also, supporting characters are introduced, and we learn about the protagonist and antagonist through their interaction with these characters. The second act ends when the protagonist recognizes the path that will take him from an ongoing crisis to (what he believes is) a resolution.

In the third act, the protagonist races toward a conclusion that will end or otherwise resolve the current crisis and provide a degree of closure. Most or all of the plotlines are resolved, and the protagonist has undergone a process of change as a result of his experiences.

Now, here's the Three Act Structure applied to the movie version of THE WIZARD OF OZ.

ACT ONE

In Act One we meet Dorothy, who is an obnoxious and self-involved child who seems unable to recognize the existence of beneficial relationships (with her Aunt and Uncle, the farm workers, etc.) and doesn't value these connections.

She is so self-absorbed that she fails to accept that anyone else's needs/wants matter, as demonstrated by the fact that she is fully aware that her dog damages a neighbor's garden and doesn't care. Actually, she may be mildly sociopathic because she cannot grasp that 'her' dog has done anything wrong and ignores the fact that the dog's lack of training is her own fault.

Dorothy's whole focus is on what she feels she does not have and what she deserves if only she can get to a better place (in her view, on the other side of the rainbow). So, she's

shallow, vain, sociopathic and unlikeable. A perfect character to have at the start of a novel, since character growth is a primary element of all good stories.

The crisis comes initially from pending consequences from her dog's vandalism. Then a big storm comes along and whisks Dorothy away to another place where (a) she has killed her antagonist through the proxy of a witch who chanced to be standing where Dorothy's house was landing; (b) everyone she meets is substantially shorter, and therefore apparently inferior to her –and her distorted self image; (c) a maternal figure appears and tells her she's special and that she has to go on a journey in order to solve her dilemma; and (d) she gets cool shoes.

Dorothy steps out of Act I and into Act II when she places her ruby slippers on the yellow brick road.

ACT TWO

In Act II, Dorothy begins a process of growth that will expand her consciousness, increase her personal store of experiences, help her develop meaningful relationships, and get her the hell home.

When she meets the Scarecrow and learns that it can talk and is in need of help, Dorothy has her first opportunity for real character growth. Instead of bugging out of there (a choice she may well have taken back home in Kansas), she helps the Scarecrow down and even offers to share her adventure with him. If the wizard she's been told to find can help Dorothy get home, maybe he could offer some assistance to someone in need of a brain. Off they go to see the Wizard. Dorothy has performed her first selfless act. She may not be beyond hope after all.

When the Scarecrow and Dorothy meet the Tin Man, there is another opportunity to perform a selfless act of charity. She does this; but this encounter also requires her to do some problem solving. The oil can shows intelligence and practicality. Good for her. Now she has helped two others in need, and at the same time she has increased her circle of valuable friends. This adds to her bank of useful experiences and also increases the odds of success.

The three of them (and her little dog, too), then encounter a frightening attack by a lion. In a real-world setting this would end badly, except for the hungry lion. But in this metaphorical tale, the lion is also a complex and damaged individual whose violent nature is a cry for help. However Dorothy doesn't know this at first. The Lion attack and Dorothy stands between this threat and her friends –and even attacks the Lion (albeit with a slap across the chops). This is a brave act that is selfless to the point of sacrifice. Dorothy is actually pretty cool now. Hero Dorothy.

Luckily the Lion is a coward, and we see Dorothy shift from attack to sympathy. Again this shows character growth in the form of a refined insight into the needs of another. Dorothy, now in the role of matriarchal clan leader, accepts the Lion into her pack, and the four of them go off to see the wizard.

All through this the Wicked Witch of the West, sister of the house-crushed Witch of the East, is after Dorothy and her ruby slippers. We never truly learn why (a storytelling shortfall explored later in novels and Broadway plays), but as a threat the Wicked Witch is constant and pervasive. She is enough of a threat that her presence, or the fear of how her anger might be manifested, influences the actions of every character in the story.

Dorothy and company overcome all obstacles and finally make it to Oz, home of the Wizard. There they present their case and the Wizard agrees to help but throws them a plot twist. He'll help only if Dorothy undertakes a quest to steal the broom of the Wicked Witch. Dorothy, however reluctant, agrees.

This is huge. The Dorothy we met in Kansas not only could not have accepted this mission; she would not have. However the Dorothy who stands before the great and mighty Oz is a far more evolved person who has benefited from adventures and experiences that have revealed her own strengths, demonstrated the power of friendship and collaborative effort, and basically served as a boot camp for Hero Dorothy.

As Dorothy and company step out of the Emerald City to begin this quest, they step out of Act Two and into...

ACT THREE

In Act III, Dorothy and her team covertly assault the stronghold of the Wicked Witch. They formulate a master plan and carry it through, albeit with some unforeseen complications (we love complications, catastrophes, challenges, calamities, and other C-words that make it more of an effort for the good guys to win).

They sneak into the castle, and there is the long-anticipated showdown between Hero Dorothy and the Wicked Witch. We get a twist when the Witch catches fire and Dorothy, in a demonstration of compassion even to her enemies, tries to douse the flames with water. And this leads to one of those 'Ooops!' moments that enrich a story: the water is fatal to the witch. (Leading one to wonder why she has a bucket of it to hand. Depression? Thoughts of suicide? We'll never know.)

With the Wicked Witch dead, Dorothy discovers that the Witch was also a tyrant and now the people of her land rejoice for freedom with a rousing chorus of 'Ding Dong the Wicked Witch' (which they sing in immediate harmony, suggesting that this is a long anticipated eventuality).

Dorothy and her posse bring the broom back to the Emerald City and BIG TWIST: the wizard is a fraud. All smoke and mirrors. No real powers. Darn. Did not see that coming.

However the Wizard has a heart of gold in his deceitful chest, and he hands out some baubles that symbolize the things Dorothy's friends need: recognition of innate intelligence, acknowledgment of dedication, and a reward for valor. Nothing for Dorothy.

The Wizard then attempts to take Dorothy home via hot air balloon, but that ends badly and the Wizard floats off to who knows where, alone. And, one wonders if that escape had been planned all along. Devious bastard.

Finally the Good Witch shows up and in another BIG TWIST, tells Dorothy that she had the power to go home all along. The rub slippers are apparently good for interdimensional travel.

We see another element of Dorothy's growth: restraint. She does NOT leap on the Good Witch and kick the crap out of her for not telling her this way the hell back in Oz. The Good Witch apparently recognized the need for a vision quest and played the ruby slipper card close to the vest.

So, Dorothy bids farewell to her friends in Oz, clicks her ruby slippers and wakes up in Kansas where she is surrounded by her Aunt and Uncle and the farm workers, all of whom are ciphers for the characters she met in Oz. Or, perhaps, vice versa.

Dorothy now recognizes the value of what she has and is properly grateful for it. Which allows us the change to step out of the story, since we now know that it's safe for Dorothy to continue on her journey. We trust that she will do well because we've seen her growth, and we know the cost.

If you look at the first Star Wars flicks, you can see an almost identical process in Luke's journey from annoying dust farmer to someone who can blow up a Death Star.

So, that's the short and long of the Three Act Structure. You may not be able to watch Wizard of Oz the same way again; and if you're a true writer, you'll be forever plagued with trying to identify the act breaks in every book, TV show or movie you ever watch. Don't blame me...blame the Greeks.