

Reader Question: How to raise the stakes in the plot?

[Scott Myers](#)

One suggestion: Focus on and elevate the Protagonist's psychological stakes.



The other kind of stakes.

Question from Greg Colburn:

Just got some feedback on two scripts (a horror actioner & a R-rated comedy) I submitted to Blue Cat... lots of positive feedback on concept, characters and plot, but I got gigged on both about NOT raising the

stakes. My protagonists each had a challenging goal, and doggedly pursued that goal to the very end. There were complications and obstacles, but the goals stayed the same and so did the stakes.

So, I thought this might make a good discussion...

— Any advice on raising the stakes?

— Examples of raising the stakes?

Interesting question. One obvious solution would be to simply make the stakes bigger than the Protagonist had — at first — thought they were and/or more difficult to obtain through (most likely) the actions of the Nemesis. But I wonder if what the readers are responding to is your stories lacking an evolution in the Protagonists — between what they want and what they need.

I've posted about this before, but briefly the idea is this: In many movies, you'll have a Protagonist who begins the story in a state of Disunity. They are living their lives in what Joseph Campbell describes as the "ordinary world," an existence in which they have cobbled together defense mechanisms, coping skills, and a belief system in order to survive psychologically. Often they will have a goal by the end of Act One of which they are conscious — let's call that what they want. For example, consider the following movies:

Casablanca: Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) is a former

patriot and freedom fighter who has rejected those ideals and become a cynical, uncaring businessman, due to being jilted by his former lover Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman). The cynic / idealist dynamic is a thumbnail description of his Disunity state. When fate bring Ilsa back to Casablanca with her husband Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid), Rick's goal emerges: He wants Ilsa back.



One of the greatest romantic triangles in cinema history.

The Apartment: C.C. Baxter (Jack Lemmon) is a decent guy with a lousy job. Furthermore one thing has led to another and he finds himself in the unenviable position of letting a group of senior management use his apartment to carry on adulterous affairs — with the hope that their good word will enable him to advance at work. Matters are complicated by

the fact that the woman Baxter secretly carries a torch for co-worker Fran Kubelik (Shirley MacLaine) is carrying on a turbulent affair with the President of the company Jeff Sheldrake (Fred MacMurry). The good guy / adultery facilitator is a description of Baxter's Disunity state. His goal: He wants a promotion.



Baxter gets in touch with his inner 'mensch'.

The Silence of the Lambs: Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) is an FBI agent-in-training who finds herself thrust into the middle of the Buffalo Bill serial murder case to see if she can get vital information from imprisoned killer Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins). However as efficient and organized Clarice may appear in the External World, she is deeply wounded in her Internal World as the result of her

father's murder — he was killed in the line of duty as a sheriff — when she was a young girl and consequent traumatizing experience of seeing the spring slaughter of the lambs on her uncle's Montana farm. The stalwart FBI agent / wounded child is a description of her Disunity state. Her goal: Save kidnap victim Catherine Martin.



Lecter knows Clarice needs to do more than save Catherine Martin... and it has something to do with this guy.

In many stories, the events of Acts Two and Three cause the Protagonist to transform, typically tapping into aspects of their psyche of which they have been largely unconscious. Per Carl Jung, the only way to move toward a state of psychological unity is for a person to get in touch with those repressed and unacknowledged areas that are nonetheless alive 'inside' our 'self.' So even as the Protagonist begins their transformation-journey with a conscious want, there lies within an unexpressed, even unknown need — and as the Protagonist is called out of their ordinary world into the 'world of adventure,' their

coping skills, defense mechanisms, and belief system — the parts of their psychological makeup which have allowed them to live up to the point of FADE IN, albeit living in a 'shallow' way — get deconstructed. And through that deconstruction, the repressed aspects of their psyche bubble up to the surface, beginning a process of reconstruction, where their need moves into the light / becomes conscious.

Casablanca: While Ilsa causes Rick to move beyond his cynicism and reconnect with his heart, Laszlo inspires Rick to reconnect with his idealism. So his want — to be with Ilsa — gets trumped by his need — to recommit to a life as a freedom fighter. His choice in response to that 'higher' calling is to send Ilsa away with Laszlo, then leave Casablanca — and his cynicism — behind to join the effort against the Nazi Germany. In his reconnection with his idealism, Rick moves into a Unity state.

The Apartment: After Sheldrake gets Baxter to let him use Baxter's apartment to carry on his tryst with Fran, Baxter does get promoted — twice in fact — to a senior management level. But per the 'wisdom' imparted to him by his next door neighbor and Mentor figure Dr. Dreyfuss (Jack Kruschen) and his growing feelings for Fran (Attractor), Baxter becomes a "mensch" by refusing to allow Sheldrake to carry on his affair with Fran, thereby sacrificing his (Baxter's) job. In other words, his need (to embrace the good guy that he fundamentally is) trumps his want (career advancement). His Unity state is cemented when Fran quits

Sheldrake, instead choosing to be with Baxter.

The Silence of the Lambs: Starling is guided by Lecter, both in the External World — through key pieces of insight into Buffalo Bill's character — and in her Internal World — probing into Clarice's psychological backstory. Finally forced to confront the unceasing torment of the crying of the lambs in her nightmares and acknowledge that horror consciously through her 'confession' to Lecter, Clarice's need emerges: Her goal becomes not only to catch Buffalo Bill, but save Catherine Martin, the young kidnap victim into whom Clarice projects her youthful wounded self. And to achieve that, she needs to kill Buffalo Bill. So here is a case where her need (to save Catherine) transforms her goal, rather than trumps it: She wants to save Catherine, but she needs to Buffalo Bill. In that act of saving Catherine and slaying Buffalo Bill, Clarice in effect 'saves' herself, exorcising 'demons' of her psychological past, allowing her to achieve a Unity state.

So the big point here per your question is this: Perhaps you may benefit by looking at your Protagonists and consider if you have articulated a want and a need — because if they do have that dynamic in place, and you exploit it effectively, you can raise the stakes of what you already have in place by elevating the meaning of the events in Act Three or even switching what the goal is.

To sum up: Sometimes a Protagonist's need may trump what they want, in effect causing the Protagonist to switch

goals. Other times need may merge with want, transforming the goal into something with 'new' meaning. In either case, if the script reader feels deeply connected on an emotional level to the Protagonist in their transformation-journey, the stakes of the story — assuming they are significant and the pursuit of them is an arduous one — should be 'big' enough to create a satisfying ending.

Note: The dynamic of Protagonist transformation does not extend to all stories, however it is the one of human culture's most fundamental narrative archetypes, as suggested by both Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung. Moreover it is present, I would argue, in most movies.

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