

The Disunity State of Clarice Starling

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How the opening of *The Silence of the Lambs* establishes the Protagonist's psychological starting point for her transformation-journey.



In the [one-week online Core I: Plot course](#) I am currently teaching, a movie we have been studying is *The Silence of the Lambs*. A superb film, one of only three to win the Big Five Oscars (Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Screenplay), I use *Silence* in classes because it exhibits every key aspect of my *character driven screenwriting theory*.

For example, Clarice's psychological transformation aligns

perfectly with four movements I have worked with as a teacher for over fifteen years:

Disunity → → → Deconstruction → → → Reconstruction → →
→ Unity

In this current class, the question arose about how the Protagonist typically begins in a state of Disunity.

In Act One, the Protagonist may appear to be satisfied with their life, but that is true only in the realm of the External World. In their Internal World, even if they aren't conscious of it, they are ready for a change. This change is required — in an existential sense — because the character has a disconnect between *how* they act (External World) and *who* they are (Internal World). Repressed or restrained, known or unknown, most Protagonists begin their story with some measure of their Core Of Being in a subservient role to the one they present to the people around them in the Ordinary World. In other words, they are living an *inauthentic life* and it is their fate to move toward an *authentic life*.

This is a psychologically based way of thinking about a character's *need*, that there are aspects of their psyche which need to emerge into the light of consciousness, and the character must embrace them and be transformed by them in concert with the events and character interactions in the narrative.

How does Act One of *The Silence of the Lambs* convey the Disunity state of the story's Protagonist — Clarice Starling?

This is what I wrote on the course site message board in response to that question.

The entirety of Act One serves as a backdrop to explore and establish the Protagonist's state of disunity. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, we see this in evidence most notably during The Hook sequence (leading to the act's midpoint) in which Clarice meets with Lecter. This whole side articulates his initial take on her Disunity:

You know what you look like to me, with your good bag and your cheap shoes? You look like a rube. A well scrubbed, hustling rube with a little taste. Good nutrition's given you some length of bone, but you're not more than one generation from poor white trash, are you, Agent Starling? And that accent you've tried so desperately to shed: pure West Virginia. What is your father, dear? Is he a coal miner? Does he stink of the lamp? You know how quickly the boys found you... all those tedious sticky fumbblings in the back seats of cars... while you could only dream of getting out... getting anywhere... getting all the way to the FBI.

Lecter sees straight through Clarice's attempts to hide her background and I believe he already senses in her an individual who is disconnected from other core aspects of her psyche. But even **before** Clarice intersects with Lecter, we get a sense of her Disunity — from the very opening sequence, a series of masterful visuals.

Let's break down those visuals:

- We are introduced to Clarice as she runs in the murky woods and at first, we don't it's an exercise field at the FBI headquarters. For all we know, she could be running from something, which is, indeed, a metaphor for where she is in life: She's been running away from the death of her father and her nightmarish experience on her uncle's Montana farm ever since. Remember: She tries to save a lamb and **ran away**. This opening image of her running echoes that.
- The obstacles on the training course are metaphors for the challenges she faces as an FBI agent in training, especially being a woman (which is reinforced several times in the movie). They're also metaphors for the obstacles she will confront in trying to save Catherine Martin.
- At the 3:09 mark, she is seen running right to left, when a bunch of male trainees dressed all in black run in the opposite direction (left to right) and...
- At the 3:29 mark in the overhead walkway, Clarice heads left to right in opposition to a bunch of other people walking right to left and...
- At the 3:48 mark, Clarice is the only trainee dressed in sweats, not in light blue shirts and khakis like all the rest working on their weapons and...
- Perhaps most emphatically, we see the dynamic visualized at the 4:02 mark in which Clarice enters an elevator filled with 8 men... all taller than her... all

wearing the same orange shirts and khakis.



Four visuals over the course of one minute of screen time in which Clarice is shown going against the flow of everybody else. What this conveys is Clarice as a Fish Out Of Water in this environment.

It also puts a spotlight on the question: *Why is she here?*

That gets explored in her meeting with Jack Crawford. He talks about her background — how he had her in a seminar he led at UVA, double major in “psych and criminology,” and that when she graduates, she wants to come “work with me in behavioral science.”

Again that poses the question: *Why?* Later, we learn her father was a lawman who was murdered in the line of duty. Why didn't she become a local cop like her father? Why move from West Virginia, go to college to study psychology and criminology, and seek to work in the behavioral science

unit of the FBI which focuses on working the most violent types of criminals including serial killers?

We learn those answers over the course of the movie. My take is two-fold: (1) Clarice wants to try to understand the mindset of Evil and answer the question, "Why did those thieves randomly take the life of my father." Hence, the FBI Behavioral Science unit. (2) She wants redemption for her father who died as an innocent 'lamb.'

Quite soon in their relationship, Lecter determines that Clarice is hiding something, a deep dark secret roiling in the shadows of her unconscious mind. While he finds her to be an interesting case — and a means by which he can craft an escape from imprisonment — Lecter is the Mentor figure Clarice needs to compel her to go *inside* her psyche and confront her greatest fears.

The foundation for everything that transpires in the rest of *The Silence of the Lambs* is established in Act One, a detailed exploration of Clarice's Disunity state, elements of which we see from the earliest scenes in the Opening sequence.

Takeaway: Consider your Protagonist. What are aspects of their life at FADE IN which reflect their state of Disunity? Immerse yourself in the life of your Protagonist and be mindful of ways which emerge from your character work which can visualize how this figure is disconnected from who they are supposed to be.