

The Theology of Cinema: Despair

[Scott Myers](#)

This commonly occurs at the end of Act Two — what is often called All Is Lost — representing an existential crisis for the Protagonist.



As many of you may know, I have a background in the academic study of theology, a B.A. in religious studies from the University of Virginia and a Masters of Divinity degree from Yale. So it is only natural I bring that perspective to how I view and understand movies and screenwriting.

Let me be clear, when I say *theological*, I mean it — in this context — in a secular way. How does that make sense?

The word “theology” is a combination of two Greek words: “theos” which means God and “logos” which means word. So theology is *words about God*. What if for this series we think of God as a metaphor for an explanation for the big questions of life? Thus, theology as *words about the meaning of life*. Broadly speaking that is one dynamic movies hit on consistently, characters forced to confront their values, behaviors, and world views related to who they are and how they should act.

In this respect, movies and theology wade in very much the same thematic waters. As Andrew Stanton noted about *Lawrence of Arabia* in this [TED Talk](#), how the central theme of that story is the question asked of the Protagonist “who are you,” that issue exists at the core of perhaps every movie, an existential exploration of a character or characters’ self-identity. So, too, with theology.

Also, movies tend to be about characters at critical junctures in their lives, facing a journey from the Old World into a New World where through a series of challenges and lessons they undergo a significant metamorphosis. Sounds an awful lot like a conversion experience to me.

Thus, it is only natural there will be a lot of crossover of theological themes in movies. But while a theological theme in a movie *may* have a religious or spiritual connotation, I am

more interested in exploring such themes metaphorically to find the widest value possible for screenwriters at large.

By working with this non-religious take on the concept, we can avail ourselves of numerous powerful theological themes in screenwriting regardless of whether our stories are secular or non-secular.

Today: Despair.

There is the general definition of *despair*: loss of hope; hopelessness.

The term takes on a special meaning in a theological context. For example in Psalms 42, the word is used three times:

Verse 5: Why are you in despair, O my soul ? And why have you become disturbed within me?

Verse 6: O my God, my soul is in despair within me.

Verse 11 [repeated]: Why are you in despair, O my soul ? And why have you become disturbed within me?

It is not just loss of hope. It is an existential question tied to one's soul.

Perhaps the single most powerful moment of despair in the Bible occurs in Mark 15:34 when Jesus, nailed to the cross and in the last moments of his human life, cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Again, not just loss of hope, but an existential experience, a deep sense of separation from God.

Let us look at this idea metaphorically. Here we may think of God as a Protagonist's purpose, not only their goal, but the psychological connection to and meaning of achieving that goal. If some major reversal occurs in the plot that puts achieving that goal at risk, indeed makes it seem like an impossibility, that can put a character into the screenwriting equivalent of despair.

This is what commonly occurs at the end of Act Two what is often called All Is Lost. Scenes of despair like these:

But if we go back to the Psalms, there is the second part of the verse: "Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my savior and my God."

Again consider that metaphorically, God equals purpose. And almost always after moments of existential despair, the Protagonist reconnects with their Authentic Self, finding reason for hope — the purpose is still there, even if redefined by the narrative's events, and the possibility of achieving that purpose still alive.

Takeaway: In a screenplay, we want to plumb the heights and depths of emotion to take a reader on an expansive journey. Hope. To Despair. To Faith. That right there is a great way to articulate the psychological arc of a story.

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