

# Screenwriting Back to Basics, Day 2: The Protagonist's Arc

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Transformation lies at the heart of the Hero's Journey.

As we prepare for the [2021 Zero Draft Thirty September Challenge](#), which begins September 1, a five-part series on Screenwriting Back to Basics.

Today: The Protagonist's Arc.

In almost all mainstream Hollywood movies as well as most indie films, the Protagonist character or characters go through some type of personal metamorphosis. It is no surprise this is the case. Joseph Campbell who studied thousands upon thousands of stories worldwide and through history determined that transformation is at the heart of The Hero's Journey. A few movie examples:

In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy Gale (Judy Garland) goes on a journey of discovery to Oz and transforms from an orphaned girl who doesn't feel at home on her aunt and uncle's farm to someone who when she returns vows, "There's no place like home."

In *Citizen Kane*, Charles Foster Kane (Orson Welles) goes

on a journey of self-destruction, spending much of his enormous wealth and power in a vain attempt to buy some semblance of the happiness he knew long ago when he was a child.

In *Tootsie*, Michael Dorsey (Dustin Hoffman) goes on a journey of gender enlightenment, beginning as a self-absorbed, insensitive male, then through his experiences as Dorothy Michaels learning that he was a better man as a woman than he was as a man.

I don't think it's a stretch to suggest that the *Protagonist metamorphosis arc* is the most universal narrative archetype that exists. And that fact raises a big question:

Why?

I have a theory: The reason why audiences respond to movies, plays, and TV shows wherein characters go through a personal transformation is because fundamentally people want to believe that we can change. We can make our lives better. We can achieve our goals. We have the potential to transform into the person we believe we can be.

If you need an object lesson in the ubiquity of this meme in contemporary culture, you have to go no further than some cable networks between 6–10AM where they sell time for a variety of infomercials. There's the Dr. Ho Ab Trimmer, Jack LaLanne's Power Juicer, Magic Bullet, the psychic Miss Cleo, Susan Powter's "Stop the Insanity," the Thighmaster,

real estate guru Tom Vu, video professor John Scherer, George Foreman's Lean Mean Grilling Machine, vacuum cleaners, life extension, Shamwow, and on and on and on. Each of these products carries in subtext the psychological message that if you buy it, it will change your life.

Or how about the 2008 elections in the United States



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Here is a quote from an Obama speech:

*“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.”*

*We are the change that we seek.* Setting aside your personal politics or mine, that is a powerful message, one that is suffused with hope, and speaks to that fundamental desire all humans have — we can change.

As writers, this theme may seem so obvious, it’s possible to largely overlook it when crafting our stories. We just *assume* it into the story. But we would be well-advised to be more conscious of and intentional about working Protagonist metamorphosis into our stories.

Just as there are underlying narrative structures to stories, I think there is a primary one for the Protagonist metamorphosis arc. It can be broken down into four movements:

Disunity>>>>Deconstruction>>>>Reconstruction>>>>  
>Unity

This presupposes one fact: In relation to the Protagonist what this means is that over the course of their journey from FADE IN to FADE OUT, they become the person they entered the story with the potential to be. That is while events in the External World impact them, the Protagonist’s metamorphosis arises from *within*.

Some would call this process getting in touch with one’s

*authentic self*. Carl Jung would call this *individuation*. As writers, we can call it *metamorphosis*.

**Disunity:** The Protagonist begins the story disconnected from their core of being, either actively suppressing that aspect of their self or ignorant of it.

**Deconstruction:** As the Protagonist is propelled into their adventure, everything they learned back in the ordinary world — belief systems, defense mechanisms, coping skills — comes under assault. The Protagonist experiences this as a negative, but it allows the 'stuff' of their core of being to start bubbling up into their consciousness.

**Reconstruction:** In the second part of Act Two, the Protagonist combines what they have learned along the way of their journey with their emerging authentic self. This is an empowering phase, not only tapping into the flow of energy deriving from their core of being, but also because all the effort they had been putting into suppressing it is now freed up.

**Unity:** The main point of the Act Three's Final Struggle is to test whether what the Protagonist has learned and who they have transformed into has taken root or not. If so, which is typical, they defeat their Nemesis and in so doing achieve Unity, an actualized authentic persona. The Denouement provides a snapshot of that metamorphosis.

A good example is Will Turner in the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl*. His state of Disunity

derives chiefly from the fact that while he's trying to live an honest, respectable life as a blacksmith, he has pirate's blood coursing through his veins. That pirate part of his self is authentic to who he is and no manner of repressing it or acting as he imagines a civil person should can extinguish its existence.

When he embarks on his adventure to find Elizabeth, accompanying Jack Sparrow, for the first part of Act Two, Will is on the defensive, forced by events to shed his civil behavior step by step (Deconstruction).

In the second half of Act Two, Will begins to act more like a pirate — tricking Jack Sparrow, all sorts of sword play and fighting as he gets more and more in touch with his pirate self (Reconstruction).

In Act Three, Will fully realizes his *pirate-ness* by swooping in to save Jack Sparrow from a hangman's noose. In fact, Elizabeth's last words in the movie are directed to her father about Will: "No, he's a pirate," a fitting imprimatur on Will reaching Unity.



Is it possible to have a story where the Protagonist doesn't change? Absolutely. Like *Forrest Gump* and *Being There*, the Protagonists change little and instead act as change agent toward others. But in a vast majority of movies, the Protagonist goes through a metamorphosis, and the nature of that arc can be described as being comprised of four movements: Disunity, Deconstruction, Reconstruction, Unity.

[Note: I know that the *Pirates of the Caribbean* screenwriters Elliott & Rossio state on the DVD that they wrote *Curse of the Black Pearl* with Elizabeth as the Protagonist. It's true she is at the center of the main plot, but in terms of which of the three major characters goes through the most significant metamorphosis, I think it's safe to say that it's Will Turner].

This week, I'll be posting something every day to remind us of a fundamental principle of screenwriting, just to make



sure we're not overlooking something obvious. Good to remember and especially for those writers who will be participating in the [2021 Zero Draft Thirty September Challenge](#).

Part 1: [Writing Scenes](#)

30 Days. Fade In. Fade Out.

It begins September 1!

To join the Zero Draft Thirty Facebook group, go [here](#).