

# Story and the Question of Self-Identity

Every story inevitably raises this question about the Protagonist: "Who am I?"

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The Spirit of the West from the movie 'Rango'

A while back, I posted an article called [The Narrative Imperative of the Hero's Journey](#). In it, I proposed the following concept:

***The events which transpire in the plot... and the characters with whom the hero intersects... all serve and support that character's transformation.***

Steven Hale wrote this in [comments](#):

*Wonderfully insightful about how story works.*

*The protagonist is often hesitant to start the transformation. "Change is good. You go first."*

*This reluctance at the beginning hooks the audience into the story. When it appears at the end of act 2 (the moment of despair / doubt before the rebirth) it energizes the audience after a long and episodic act, as well as creating suspense. (One of the audience's biggest fears is that the movie will end prematurely.)*

Here is my response:

*I like to think of that end of Act 2 "all is lost" reversal as posing an existential question of the Protagonist: "Who am I?" Are they the individual who is becoming a New Person, a Transformed Individual, and thus willing to take on the Big Challenge against all odds... or will they refuse to go forward and return to their Old Self. It was an inauthentic existence, but at least they know what it is and it's safer than confronting what lies ahead if they choose to go forward.*

*In almost all movies, at least commercial ones, the Protagonist responds to that existential question by going forward... and if they lean into their emerging Need, embracing it as part of their New Consciousness... if they truly 'get' the emotional wisdom imparted to them in their relationship with the Attractor and the intellectual wisdom learned through their relationship with the Mentor... if they put all \*that\**

*together... maybe with a surprise assist from a Trickster turned ally like Han Solo in SW:IV... just maybe the Protagonist can pull off the against all odds victory over the Nemesis.*

*The inevitability is as much if not more about the Protagonist becoming who they are supposed to be than vanquishing the Nemesis. The audience experiences the thrill of the Hero capping off their transformation journey, a satisfying emotional end point to the story.*

Which is to say that at the psychological foundation of Story lies the question of self-identity, specifically that of the Protagonist.

It's there at the very beginning of the narrative as most often, the Protagonist is living an *inauthentic existence*. They are not who they are supposed to be.

It's there in how they respond to the Call to Adventure: Are they reluctant to go or do they embrace the challenge?

It's there in every challenge and test they confront during the middle of the story, each event causing the Protagonist to incrementally move forward in their transformation journey. Events shape Attitude which in turn alters their Behavior.

It's there at the All Is Lost moment: Do they have the courage to go forward in the face of seemingly

insurmountable odds or return to their Old World, an inauthentic life, but one at least they know and understand.

It's there in the Final Struggle: Has the Protagonist learned what they need to learn and embraced their emerging Need enabling them to succeed... or did they fail to "'become who you are?'"

Movies have a way of rumbling around in my brain, popping up into my consciousness out of nowhere. As I was writing this, a scene from the wonderful animated movie *Rango* sprang to mind. Here is a plot summary:

*Rango is a pet chameleon always on the lookout for action and adventure, except the fake kind, where he directs it and acts in it. After a car accident, he winds up in an old western town called Dirt. What this town needs the most is water, but they also need a hero and a sheriff. The thirsty Rango instantly takes on the role of both and selfishly agrees to take on the case of their missing water.*

In Rango's All Is Lost moment, he leaves the town and wanders into the desert, passing out from heat and exhaustion. When he wakes up, this happens:

*[spots the Figure]*

*Rango: The Spirit of the West.*

*[approaches Figure]*

*Rango: Excuse me, Mr. Spirit, sir?*

*[Figure digging in the dirt holds up an item he's found]*

*Figure: Ah, there's a beaut. Sometimes you gotta dig deep*

*to find what you're looking for. [to Rango] So you made it?*

*Rango: Is this heaven?*

*Figure: If it were, we'd be eating Pop Tarts with Kim Novak.*

*Rango: Yeah, no kidding. What're you doing out here?*

*Figure: Searchin', same as you.*

*Rango: I don't even know what I'm looking for anymore. I don't even know who I am. They used to call you "the man with no name."*

*Figure: These days they got a name for just about everything. It doesn't matter what they call ya'. It's the deeds that make the man.*

*[walks back to golf cart]*

*Rango: Yeah, but my deeds just made things worse. I'm a fraud, a phony. My friends believed in me, but they need some kind of hero.*

*Figure: Then be a hero.*

*Rango: Oh, no. No-no. You don't understand. I'm not even supposed to be here.*

*Figure: That's right. You came a long way to find something that isn't out here. Don't you see? It's not about you. It's about them.*

*Rango: But I can't go back.*

*Figure: Don't know you've got a choice, son.*

*[uses finger to draw a rectangle in cart window, framing Rango in it]*

*Figure: No man can walk out of his own story.*

*[Figure drives away in golf cart]*

Here is the scene from the movie:

This Mentor figure — the Spirit of the West — gives Rango some existential advice, speaking directly to the chameleon's question of self-identity. *I don't even know who I am.*

And a rock-hard truth that speaks to both characters: "No man can walk out of his own story."

True that. Each of us has our own Beginning, Middle and End. So, too, do the characters we write. Our stories, fictional or otherwise, give us each a structure within which to make sense of who we are — and create who we are to become.

In other words, self-identity.

Takeaway: Consider the story you're currently writing. Do your characters deal with issues of self-identity?

Consciously or not, directly or obliquely, more than likely you've got this dynamic at play. Maybe there's something to be mined by digging into your characters on an existential level.