

## **THREE-ACT STRUCTURE VS THIRD ACT STRUCTURE:**

### THE SELF-SACRIFICE

We've all heard of the three act structure. We experience it every time we tell a joke, an anecdote, or explain to the police quite why it was necessary to drive significantly over the speed limit.

Both academics and producers prefer to follow this traditional approach as they know through research that a typical audience will subconsciously expect to be eased into the protagonist's routine before the inciting incident strikes and his or her life takes a turn for the worst. However, there is another weapon in the armoury of the scriptwriter that if perfected can lead to a different and more powerful emotional impact for our unsuspecting John and Jane Doe.

To explain, I will use the example of two recent films - *Gran Torino* and *Seven Pounds* - which in their thematic similarities of self-sacrifice for the good of others (otherwise known as the Jesus complex) portray a fundamental dichotomy of technique. In other words, they get the same result through a different recipe.

*Gran Torino*, then, is the story of a grouchy, dying old man, suspicious of foreigners, and with a loathing towards the young hooligans of his neighbourhood that are devoid of respect. The story begins from the death of his wife and takes us to his eventual demise for the good of the Mong family that win him over through their culture of tolerance. It is a sad, evocative story that is told in the traditional three act structure.

On the other hand, *Seven Pounds* takes a much different approach. Here, we have a protagonist who is charming, physically healthy, and generous beyond belief. His ability to build a rapport with strangers is in direct contrast to the grouchy old man who prefers to be left alone to his beer and his memories. This protagonist is dying emotionally rather than physically which leads to his self-sacrifice as a means of cleansing his soul.

To focus more intently on the internal element of the story, *Seven Pounds* is set almost entirely in the third act: the point from which our hero has reached his moment of irreversible change. What follows is a portrayal of his response to this change. It is a two hour microscopic look at the most emotionally charged period of a film where the protagonist fights to complete his goal. The underlying tension comes not just from what is going to happen, but more importantly from what happened in the past to create this situation. The link up - since we do still need three acts - is therefore done through the medium of narration and flashbacks, gradually releasing the key first and second act plot points which leads to the big climax at the end. The double reveal of past and present incidents gives the viewer an emotional double-barrelled shot to the heart.

By skipping the early plot, preventing us from putting ourselves in the hero's position, we the audience are forced to split our attention between what drives the protagonist, and the situation that is developing on screen, as we try to understand who he is and why he does what he does. However, in *Gran Torino* the audience is focused almost entirely on the incidents that force the protagonist to react with his change incidental to this. We put

ourselves in his position and try to determine what physically will happen next. Will he pull out a gun, or will he pull out a box of cigarettes? We do not attempt to explain the cause of his actions only the effect, whereas in *Seven Pounds* we need to know the cause before we can understand the effect. To use a metaphor to describe this difference: in the three act structure we hold the protagonist's hand throughout the journey; we slowly begin to empathise with the unique twists and turns of his or her life and gradually see that person almost as a friend. However, with a third act film we observe the protagonist as a stranger walking in the distance, and so counter-intuitively we pay more attention to the subtlety of their movements. Thus, we build a stronger rapport.

*Seven Pounds*, therefore, is an internally driven story. We are interested in what motivates this man to act the way he does. This leads to a fundamentally different story, which if pitched in the traditional three act structure might sound very similar to other stories of self-sacrifice. The key aspect of this is that in *Grand Torino* we see the protagonist shift from uncaring grouch to caring fatherly figure. In *Seven Pounds*, however, the protagonist himself never changes, but changes everyone around him. In fact, he does change, but only very briefly in the final flashback as a means of reveal rather than an emotional device to help the audience cheer the hero on to victory in the third act.

In some ways, then, one might say that the protagonist in *Seven Pounds* is similar to Forrest Gump and Dostoyevsky's Prince Mishkin (in *The Idiot*) where in both cases the protagonist changes those around him without being changed himself. However, this is misleading. *Forrest Gump* and *The Idiot* are both stories of love and acceptance where a man of low intelligence is humiliated by those around him. Yet, these protagonists never change because they are unable to, whereas in *Seven Pounds* the moment of change has already taken place. This is an important distinction to keep in mind.

Taking this concept of a third-act film to your own work, you must ask yourself what is the objective of your story? If you wish to tell the story of a character who fulfils a want after an inciting incident sets him or her on a particular journey then you should clearly focus on a three-act structure. However, where the character changes irreversibly as a result of the inciting incident itself (rather than a series of incidents) there are other options available. It is important that the reaction following the incident is disproportionately stronger than the protagonist's character flaw. If *Seven Pounds* was told in the traditional way the audience would not be able to empathise with the reaction of the main character as it would seem too extreme without a great deal of exposition in order to really care for the man (similar to the death of Bruce Wayne's father in *Batman Begins* or the similar causation death in *Spiderman*). Therefore, by manipulating the structure we can show how an ordinary man can feel compelled to act in an extraordinary way based on a single moment. However, this only really works where the inciting incident is simplistic and identifiable so we can grasp its meaning in a series of short, punchy flashbacks.

The message then - don't be afraid to stray from the three act structure, but make sure you keep audience expectations firmly in mind otherwise you risk sacrificing more than you had ever anticipated.

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