

Scribe Meets World Screenwriting Series

TROUGH OF HELL

How to Conclude Act Two of Your
Screenplay with **MAXIMUM IMPACT**



H.R. D'COSTA

Trough of Hell

How to Conclude Act Two of Your Screenplay with Maximum Impact

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Introduction

Have you ever been stuck in the desert of Act Two?

If you're like me, you know how your screenplay or novel is going to start. Maybe not the exact image or line, but you've got a rough idea of what you're going to write. Same goes for the ending.

So, you begin writing your story with lots of enthusiasm...until you reach the middle, aka Act Two. That's where you get stuck. Suddenly, all of your enthusiasm evaporates.

Blank pages are scary in general. But blank pages from Act Two are downright *terrifying*.

There are two main ways to tackle this problem. One is to determine the midpoint, the event at your script's center which functions like a fulcrum, taking your story into a new direction, and perhaps increasing the story stakes. While the midpoint strategy is definitely useful, it's a topic for another book.

The second solution is to focus on the events which end the second act—often referred to as the “all is lost” moment. That's what this screenwriting guide is all about.

My high school track coach used to tell me to keep my gaze on the finish line; for some reason, you run faster that way.

The same principle applies to Act Two. Once you've determined how it's going to end, it will be much, much easier for you to write.

Everything will fall into place. You'll write more quickly, more effectively. And the pages you write will be more engaging too.

What the “All Is Lost” Moment Is Really About

So what's the key to creating the perfect “all is lost” moment? I'll tell you right here, right now for free: create a painful, emotionally charged series of scenes which somehow brings the hero closer to his goal...even though, on the surface, he appears to be the furthest from it.

Those three ingredients—pain, emotion, and paradox—are basically all you need to create a second act ending which is effective and powerful. In short, one with impact.

Combined, each of these elements re-engages audiences, right when their interest is about to flag. That's why it's so important to get this plot point right.

Do this, and you'll have audiences eating from the palm of your hand. Promise.

“All Is Lost” = Trough of Hell

There's a reason I envision the “all is lost” moment as a trough of hell. It's a trough in the sense that it's an emotional low point for your hero. The lower you bring your hero, the deeper you dig his trough, the more impact it will have—and the more you'll engage audiences at this critical juncture.

This emotional intensity is generated by painful experiences—that's where the “hell” part comes in. It's a reminder that this isn't the time to “molly-cuddle” your hero; this is the time to make him hurt.

(As for the paradoxical aspect, it's implied. “Paradoxical trough of hell” is just too wordy a term to use!)

Once you know how to craft a gripping trough of hell, you'll be less likely to get stuck in the desert of Act Two. Completing the middle of your story will become far less terrifying.

You'll be approaching your keyboard (or pad of paper) with anticipation instead of dread. Sounds good, right?

At this point, you might be curious about specifics. We'll address those next.

What This Book Will Teach You:

With this screenwriting guide, you'll learn:

- how to use four different pain types to inflict maximum damage to your hero (and why you should)
- three methods to make the trough of hell more emotionally intense—without altering a single beat of the “all is lost” moment
- how the hero seems to be the furthest away from his goal, when you and I both know he's about to accomplish it in 15 pages (give or take)

...and that's just in Part I! You'll also learn specific tips and strategies you can implement right away, including:

- seven common ways to end Act Two and how to overcome the unique challenges each presents
- how to enchant audiences by combining multiple trough types
- the trick Peter Jackson used to increase the emotional weight of *THE TWO TOWERS*
- why the most effective way to hurt your hero—even in an action movie—doesn't involve blood, burns, or bruises
- five different forms of betrayal you can use to split your heroes apart
- how to use setups and payoffs to extricate your hero from dicey situations (like capture and death)
- the secret sauce to turning allies into foes (think Dr Nichols in *THE FUGITIVE*)
- what stuck out the most to Johnny Depp when filming *THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL*...and why it matters to you
- the *STAR WARS* secret which will help you achieve galactic screenwriting dominion
- five cliché-free ways to show your hero's post-trough distress
- how to pace your story with panache
- how to handle problems specific to thrillers, action movies, comedies, and romantic comedies

Like Examples? Me Too!

I'm a big fan of learning by example. So I use plenty of them throughout this book to illustrate my points. But sometimes examples just aren't enough.

That's why I've also included **eight detailed case studies** which should help you implement all the hand-selected screenwriting tips I'm about to share.

Each movie in the case studies section was carefully chosen based on its educational value and commercial success. I cover a variety of genres too. If you've ever wondered how films as diverse as *BRIDESMAIDS*, *THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*, *OCEAN'S 11*, and *BRAVEHEART* conquered the end of Act Two, you're about to find out.

But before we get to the juicy stuff, I need to address...

Caveats and Other Ephemera

Screenwriting Knowledge

This guide assumes that you have at least basic knowledge of screenwriting principles and concepts. It doesn't address screenplay formatting at all. The focus here is on structure, primarily the trough of hell, (aka the “all is lost” moment).

While other characters besides the hero often endure their own troughs, I, for the most part, focus on the big kahuna. If you understand how to craft an effective trough of hell for your hero and how that trough affects audiences, it should be easy to apply this knowledge to your other characters.

Additionally, while the majority of screenplays end Act Two on a low point, there are a few—not many, but some—which end on an emotional high point, typically a false victory.

Although powerful, this kind of structure is rarely employed and is definitely not the focus of this screenwriting guide. If your aim is to write a screenplay which ends Act Two with a false victory, this book will probably still be helpful to you, but perhaps not in the way you were anticipating.

Also keep in mind, this is just *one way* to approach screenplay structure. There are certainly other successful perspectives. You need to pick the method which helps YOU tell the best story.

Speaking of storytelling...

Can This Screenwriting Guide Help Novelists?

Sure! If the success of mega-author James Patterson is any indication, readers enjoy novels whose plotting, pacing, and twists mirror those found in a Hollywood blockbuster. The principles and examples contained in this guide can help you craft a movie-style middle for your book which keeps your readers turning the pages.

However, my references are made from the point of view of writing a screenplay. Translation? You'll have to decide how to apply these principles and examples to the process of writing a novel. Since screenwriting and novel writing are both forms of storytelling, it should be fairly simple!

Spoiler Alert

There are a bunch of spoilers in this book. There have to be. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to show you how to craft clever surprises and plot twists of your own. But since all of my examples are pulled from commercial and/or critical hits (like TAKEN, IRON MAN, JERRY MAGUIRE, MISS CONGENIALITY, MRS DOUBTFIRE, HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER FROM AZKABAN, and PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL), the odds are very high you've seen them already.

And if you haven't...what are you waiting for?

Notes on Style

I usually refer to the main character of a story as the hero. As a female, I'm very much aware that movies also star kick-butt heroines too. But alternating between hero and heroine sounded awkward and confusing, at least to me. So for the sake of clarity, I've stuck to hero.

Finally, formatting an ebook can get complicated. To keep things simple, I've put the titles of movies in "all caps" but used italics for book titles. If the creative work I'm referring to happens to be both a book and a movie, (like THE HUNGER GAMES or HARRY POTTER), I usually use all caps.

Okay, I think that covers everything. Are you ready to conquer Act Two...for good? Then let's get started!

Part I: The Three Key Characteristics of the Trough of Hell

The trough of hell is a tricky little fellow to pin down. This is, in large part, due to the fact that it's usually comprised of a series of story events, rather than one single incident.

But there are three key characteristics which unify this compilation of events, making it easier for you to identify and analyze this essential plot beat:

- it is painful
- it is emotionally wrenching, and
- it is paradoxical

Of these, the second is by far the most important. Achieve that, and your script will be miles ahead of the competition.

Hopefully, by understanding these three characteristics, you will not only conquer the mass of blank pages waiting for you at the end of Act Two, you will also create a deeply engaging experience for audiences who have the pleasure of accompanying your hero on his journey.

So, let's get to it, shall we?

Key Characteristic #1: It's Painful

It may seem counterintuitive, but one of the best things you can do to your hero is to treat him cruelly. In the words of Kurt Vonnegut, "Be a sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them—in order that the reader may see what they are made of."

That's great advice. Unfortunately, many storytellers—whether they're screenwriters or novelists—tend to ignore it. Instead, they dote on their hero.

They're reluctant to put their hero in harm's way, most likely because the hero is usually the character whose essence and history most mirror their own personality and experience.

You need to overcome that protective instinct.

As Hal Ackerman observes in *Write Screenplays that Sell*, "This goes against our grain. We writers are mostly nice people. Generous of heart and spirit. When we see a fellow human being in distress, our impulse is to give that person consolation and solace. These are lovely human traits. But as writers, we must jettison those annoyingly charitable traits and become brutal, unmoved by our characters' travails. We must not be so quick to reel them in from the cold, nor so compassionate as to protect and nurture them and shield them from pain. Rather, we want to expose them, bring them to the moment of their worst nightmare at the worst possible time."

That worst possible time? It's at the end of your second act, during your hero's trough of hell. In all likelihood, your first set of ideas of how the hero's trough should unfold is probably the equivalent of a paper cut. You need to find a way to turn it into a gaping wound (which is, needless to say, genre-appropriate).

And after that, try to figure out a way to throw salt on the wound. Unstinting pain, that's your primary order of business at this stage of your story. This is why I've dubbed this plot point a trough *of hell*. The "hell" part is there to remind you that THIS is the moment to put your hero through the wringer.

By being cruel to your hero, you're being kind to audiences who're expecting to experience a roller coaster of emotions. The trough of hell is the "dip" which makes your hero's eventual ascent all the more powerful.

In practice, being cruel entails inflicting your hero with a combination of the four types of pain discussed below:

Physical Pain

The most obvious way to hurt your hero is through physical injury. Prime candidates include bruises, cuts, and burns.

Depending on your story, poisoning might even be an option.

In many movies, at the trough of hell, the villain (or one of his henchmen) will overestimate the hero's physical injuries to such an extent, he will leave, assuming the hero has died.

Take *IRON MAN*. Dissatisfied with his role as a merchant of death, Tony Stark decides to cease his lucrative weapons manufacturing business. His second-in-command, Obadiah Stane, doesn't—to put it mildly—take the news well. Obadiah will do whatever it takes to continue to profiteer off of war, even if it means dispatching Tony himself.

In a second attempt to vanquish Tony, Obadiah sneaks into Tony's mansion and temporarily immobilizes the hero with a device ironically manufactured by Stark Industries. Helpless, Tony can only watch as Obadiah plucks the miniature arc reactor, which prevents shrapnel from entering Tony's heart, from his chest. Assuming that nature will take its course, Obadiah hastily departs. Fortunately, Tony soon finds a way to return to the land of the living. (We'll discuss his “resurrection device” later on, in Part II of this book.)

The dramatic action movie *COLLATERAL* puts a unique twist on this trope. In this film, the hero, a timid cab driver named Max, purposefully drives his vehicle into a divider, in the hopes this maneuver will lethally injure his only passenger, a sociopathic hit man named Vincent.

Unfortunately, Max's maneuver doesn't take Vincent out of commission. The hit man emerges from the accident unscathed, and runs away from the damaged vehicle in order to complete his fifth, and final, hit of the night.

The threat of physical injury is often at the heart of the stunts and set pieces which pepper thrillers, action movies, and sci-fi and fantasy films. Physical duress is also at the heart of many farcical gags in comedies. However, in this genre, the hero's utter browbeating is played for laughs. Phil's tiger-induced scratches in *THE HANGOVER* were humorous; in a James Bond flick, they would've been deadly.

When you're writing your script outline or rough draft, your first ideas of how to wound your hero may gravitate towards physical pain. After all, cinema is a visual medium, and physical injuries are easy to describe on paper and to depict on-screen. But the range of human suffering comes in many forms, most of which leave wounds a doubting Thomas could never inspect with his skeptical fingers.

This sentiment is best expressed by Charles, the awkward hero of *FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL*. After making a horrible faux pas, Charles's deaf brother asks him how he's feeling. Charles replies with a question, “Remember the time you started Dad's boat and the propeller cut my leg to shreds?” His brother signals in the affirmative. “Well,” Charles says, “this is worse.”

After reading about emotional, psychological, and psychic pain—explored in the following sections—you'll probably be inclined to agree!

Emotional Pain

As its name implies, emotional pain is incurred through an emotional wound, typically the result of a rift in interpersonal relationships. Such discord automatically triggers feelings of distress. Unlike physical pain, emotional pain leaves the human body intact; nevertheless, it's no less devastating to your hero—or heroine.

For example, in the romantic comedy *NOTTING HILL*, Anna, a famous actress, makes herself incredibly vulnerable in order to win back her love interest, a mild-mannered bookstore owner named Will. “I have to go away today,” she says. “But, I wondered if I didn't...whether you might let me see you a little, or...a lot, maybe. See if you could like me again.”

But Will, expecting that he will only be cast aside later, declines. Earnestness filling her doe-brown eyes, Anna makes one final plea. “The fame thing isn't really real, you know? Don't forget, I'm also just a girl...standing in front of a boy...asking him to love her.”

Anna's heartfelt words don't sway Will, and his steadfast rejection is as hurtful to Anna as any bullet, hand grenade, or poison-tipped arrow. That's precisely why Will declines Anna's suggestion to get back together again; he's protecting himself by staving off this kind of emotional pain in the future.

While romantic rejection is particularly painful, it's certainly not the only kind of emotional pain your hero can

experience. Getting cut off from social circles hurts just as much. *MEAN GIRLS* is a perfect example of this. In the hit teen comedy, clueless Cady Heron tries her best to navigate the perilous social waters at her new high school. With the encouragement of two misfits, her only genuine friends, she infiltrates a clique known as the Plastics and plans to dethrone Regina, the clique's "queen bee."

Cady succeeds all too well, becoming just as manipulative as Regina. During Cady's trough of hell, she loses all the social clout she single-mindedly pursued, as well as the support of the two misfits whom Cady maltreated in her quest for social domination. After an egregious rumor circulates around the school, Cady's social standing, such that it was, hits negative digits. In a very modern depiction of banishment, she's forced to retreat to a school bathroom stall to eat her lunch alone.

In addition to lovers and friends, emotional pain can also be produced through a rift between family members. Take *MRS DOUBTFIRE*. A devoted dad, Daniel Hillard can't stand that his divorce has significantly decreased the amount of quality time he can spend with his children. His solution? To pose as a female nanny, the unflappable Mrs Doubtfire.

Of course, by the end, Daniel's duplicity is exposed. His ex-wife's horrified expression says it all: he's about to lose everything. And he does. At court, the judge awards full custody of his three children to Daniel's ex-wife.

Effectively banished from his children's lives, Daniel is only permitted supervised visits every Saturday. To a dad who "needs to be with his children every day, the way he needs air," this lack of contact is soul-crushing.

So far, the examples of emotional pain which I've described aren't the result of permanent loss. Regretting his decision to reject Anna, Will could always chase after her and try to woo her back; Cady can apologize to her high school classmates and reclaim her proper spot within the school's social hierarchy; while Daniel's ex-wife can have a change of heart and allow Daniel to see his children more frequently than once a week. This is, in fact, what occurs during the final act of *NOTTING HILL*, *MEAN GIRLS*, and *MRS DOUBTFIRE*, respectively.

Unfortunately, not every loss is so transient. In many films, a key person in the hero's life—a mentor, friend, spouse, parent, or most horrifyingly, a child—will die during the hero's trough of hell.

A classic example of this can be found in *STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE*. Under the tutelage of his skilled mentor, a Jedi knight named Obi-Wan Kenobi, Luke Skywalker trains in the ways of "the Force, the power which binds the galaxy together" in order to overthrow the tyrannical villains controlling the Galactic Empire.

During the end of an extensive trough of hell which concludes the second act, Luke witnesses Darth Vader—skilled in the dark side of the Force—slaying Obi-Wan. Fortunately, for Luke, his mentor is able to convey messages of inspiration to him from beyond the grave. Indeed, this communication sets the stage for Luke's trough of hell during the film's sequel, *THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK*.

In it, Luke sees a vision of the future in which his friends are in pain. He decides to abandon his Jedi training to rescue them. Obi-Wan's spirit, along with Luke's new mentor, Yoda, pleads with Luke not to go. Finally, Obi-Wan says, "If you choose to face Vader, you will do it alone. I cannot interfere."

By rejecting Luke's decision, Obi-Wan is, by extension, rejecting Luke. Thus, Luke loses Obi-Wan again, but in a method of separation which drastically differs from the previous film.

Nevertheless, Luke was lucky to communicate with Obi-Wan, even after the Jedi knight passed away. Other heroes are not so fortunate. We can examine another epic franchise, *STAR TREK*, for an example. JJ Abrams's 2009 reboot follows the story of two Starfleet Academy cadets, the reckless Kirk, and the rational Spock. During Spock's trough of hell, as his home planet crumbles around him, he witnesses his mother's death.

An ordinary human would be devastated after experiencing these losses. But Spock is half-Vulcan, and Vulcan society scorns such depth of emotion. Consequently, Spock is not free to experience his sorrow. This internal war (a form of psychic distress we'll discuss in a bit) heightens the intensity of an already emotionally-charged event.

Psychological Pain

What exactly is psychological pain? It's the kind of distress whose root lies within your hero's thoughts, which are frequently repetitive to the point of obsession. It's this *intellectual* component which distinguishes psychological pain from physical and emotional pain.

When your hero is under psychological duress, you can see the “cogs” furiously turning in his brain, much like a hamster on a running wheel. Despite this furious mental activity, your hero doubts that he’ll ever be able to come up with a solution to his problem—therein lies the anxiety!

As you can probably guess, this kind of distress usually occurs when your hero is stymied in some major fashion. The walls are closing in; the exits have been closed off. The hero’s run out of time; he’s run out of options.

He’s wondering, “How am I going to get out of this mess? How am I going to survive this situation?” The more he dwells on these difficulties, the more intense his psychological distress will become.

Take the underestimated thriller, *FRACTURE*. District attorney Willy Beachum is determined to prove that a brilliant engineer, Mr Crawford, shot his own wife. Beachum knows it, we know it, *everyone* knows it. But no one can *prove* it. Beachum has no evidence.

The only witness to the attempted murder—Mrs Crawford herself—is in a coma. In fact, cleared of all charges, Crawford’s first act as a free man is to order the hospital to pull the plug on the machines keeping his wife alive.

In a frenzy, Beachum tries to use legal means to thwart Crawford. He seeks a court order from his new boss, who wants nothing to do with the Crawford case. Then, he seeks a court order from his old boss, who wants him to move on with his life. By the time he manages to secure a court order from a soft-hearted judge, Beachum emanates the overwhelming sense of despair which is so characteristic of psychological pain.

THE USUAL SUSPECTS is another great example of heroes who experience psychological distress because they’ve run plum out of options. No one in the gang of crooks, least of all Dean Keaton, is keen to follow the demands of criminal mastermind Keyser Soze.

It’s easy to understand their reluctance. Soze’s emissary, a lawyer named Kobayashi, informs them that Soze wants them to perform a dangerous mission with little likelihood of success. Disbelieving Soze even really exists, Keaton concludes that killing Kobayashi is the perfect way to extricate the group from the dicey situation.

Unfortunately, their scheme doesn’t go according to plan. A hairsbreadth away from getting shot, Kobayashi reveals the ace up his sleeve. Keaton’s ex-girlfriend, someone Keaton truly loves, is in town too. If Kobayashi dies, so does she.

At first, Keaton is skeptical. But Kobayashi provides proof. With his own eyes, Keaton observes his former lover in a business meeting taking place in Kobayashi’s very own conference room. This, coupled with the assassination of one of their own as well as threats to other loved ones, forces Keaton and his cohort of criminals to confront the distressing truth: they’re boxed in on all sides. The only way out of their predicament is to follow Soze’s orders.

In action movies and thrillers, psychological suffering frequently manifests itself as torture. Obviously, forms of torture like whipping and waterboarding incur a significant degree of physical pain. But the point of torture isn’t to break down your hero’s body, but to break down his mind. It is definitely a psychological onslaught in addition to a physical one.

Without going into graphic detail, I will mention that the James Bond thriller *CASINO ROYALE* is an excellent example of this. The villain, Le Chiffre, tortures the British spy in order to elicit a password which protects a multimillion dollar casino jackpot. Thanks to his training and innate resilience, Bond is able to resist. At one point, although he’s in extreme physical and mental agony, Bond even mocks Le Chiffre.

On a more lighthearted note, embarrassment is another form of psychological distress which is often used to great effect in comedies and romantic comedies. While embarrassment has an emotional element, there’s a heavy cognitive aspect to it as well, as people compare their behavior to what is deemed socially acceptable.

The degree of embarrassment produced is also influenced by the evaluation of external factors, primarily (a) how many observers are present (unlike shame, embarrassment requires a witness), and (b) the observers’ relationship to the embarrassed party (the same incident might evoke embarrassment if witnessed by an employer, but only mere amusement if witnessed by a sibling). Hence, to increase your hero’s embarrassment—and correspondingly audiences’ emotional involvement—increase the number of people observing your hero’s embarrassing situation and/or include key people in the group of observers whose good opinion your hero wishes to secure.

To illustrate, let’s take a look at one (of the many) embarrassing incidents to inflict singleton Bridget Jones in *BRIDGET JONES’S DIARY*. At a swanky book launch party, her boss, Mr Fitzherbert (or as she refers to him, Mr Fitzpervert) asks

Bridget to introduce him before he introduces the guest of honor, the author of *Kafka's Motorbike: The Greatest Book of Our Time*.

Unfortunately, public speaking is not Bridget's forte, and she makes one gaffe after another. When she's confronted by skeptical stares from both Salman Rushdie and Lord Archer, she reduces *Kafka's Motorbike* from "the greatest book of our time" to "one of the top thirty books of our time...at least."

In this case, Bridget's embarrassment is especially acute because of the quantity of witnesses present. A fairly large crowd has assembled to celebrate the questionable merits of *Kafka's Motorbike*.

Even worse, this crowd is populated not just with literary heavyweights such as Rushdie and Archer, but also by her boss, the aforementioned Mr Fizherbert, as well as two potential suitors, Daniel Cleaver and Mark Darcy. If these individuals had been replaced with Bridget's group of mad hatter friends, she probably would've exited the stage filled with amusement rather than embarrassment.

Psychic Pain

Psychic pain is a specialized form of psychological distress in which the hero is plagued by confusion over, or disturbance to, his *identity*. In other words, the crux of his psyche has been so wounded that he regards his self-concept with growing mistrust.

What kind of person is he? Is he the kind of person he always believed he was—or is he someone lesser than the man he claims to be? What is his purpose in life? Is he actually following it...or merely giving lip service to it?

These kinds of questions explain why Spock's suffering in JJ Abrams's *STAR TREK* is so acute. Psychic pain is layered with Spock's emotional distress. As a Vulcan, he's supposed to be stoic in the face of his mother's death. But as a human, her death should elicit grief.

No matter how Spock reacts, he will be dishonoring a part of his identity. This conflict tears him up from the inside out, creating an intense trough and a gripping story.

At least young Spock can comfort himself that he didn't cause his mother's death. Other heroes are not so lucky. They are consumed by one of the most agonizing forms of guilt to plague a man: knowing that they are responsible for the death of and/or pain to the people they love.

TRAFFIC is a perfect example. Javier Rodriguez and Manolo Sanchez, two Mexican cops, have discovered that a high-ranking official, General Salazar, is ruthlessly eliminating one drug cartel in order to bolster another. Manolo wants to sell this information to the DEA, but Javier cautions him not to. The danger to their lives isn't worth the money.

Unfortunately, Manolo disregards Javier's advice. Javier's words prove to be tragically prophetic, as soon thereafter, two of the general's underlings pick up Javier and Manolo and transport them to the desert—an ideal location to bury their bodies.

Javier seems resigned to his fate, but Manolo is wracked by guilt. If Manolo had been less greedy, less foolish, if he had been a better friend, a better professional partner, then Javier wouldn't be in this horrific situation.

With this knowledge weighing on his conscience, Manolo begs their captors to let Javier go. "Javier had nothing to do with this. It was all my idea. Punish me, not him." The dishonorable nature of his death also increases Manolo's burdens, causing him to make another futile request. "Do me a favor. Don't tell Ana [Manolo's wife] I died like this. Tell her it was something else. Something official. Tell her I died doing something worthy."

While Manolo was particularly troubled about the way his wife would remember him, other heroes may be more concerned about the way the world will remember them. In *MEET JOE BLACK*, Bill Parrish perfectly explains why a man's legacy matters so much. "I don't want anybody buying up my life's work! Turning it into something it wasn't meant to be. A man wants to leave something behind. He wants it left behind the way he made it. He wants it to be run the way he ran it, with a sense of honor, of dedication, of truth." Noble sentiments, which sound even more impressive when delivered by actor Anthony Hopkins.

Regrettably, fate has other plans in store for Parrish. During his trough of hell, he's ousted as chairman of the board from the company he built from the ground up. To add injury to insult, the board votes to sell the company to John Bontecou,

an offer which Parrish previously rejected because Parrish finds Bontecou's style of business "offensive."

Parrish's instincts are proven right: once he's acquired Parrish Communications, Bontecou plans to dismantle the company and sell its parts to the highest bidder, effectively throwing a stake through Parrish's hard-won legacy.

We can see the same concept in play in *IRON MAN*. Obadiah Stane isn't content to take Tony's life. Oh, no, the ruthless businessman wants to twist his backstabbing knife even deeper and ruin Tony's legacy as well. Having become disgusted with his identity as a merchant of death, Tony announces to a crowd of reporters that Stark Industries will no longer manufacture weapons.

But Obadiah has other plans in mind. "What a masterpiece," he says, holding up the miniature arc reactor he's just plucked from Tony's heart. "Look at that. This is your legacy. A new generation of weapons with this at its heart." If Obadiah's schemes are successful, Tony will be forever known for the very thing he's come to despise.

For the record, your hero doesn't have to be consumed by concerns over his legacy in order to wound him through his profession. Take surgeon Miranda Bailey of the television series *GREY'S ANATOMY*. Saving lives—in the most professional and efficient way possible—is a core part of her identity. Towards the end of season nine, when she discovers that she's inadvertently killed three of her patients, this identity is thrown into a tailspin.

Although she performed each surgery with her customary skill and diligence, unfortunately, she was operating while infected by staph. Because the hospital purchased defective surgical gloves, she transmitted the disease into her patients' already vulnerable bodies.

Later, Dr Bailey is cleared of all wrongdoing. She followed proper protocols; it is the glove manufacturer who is really at fault. But that doesn't assuage Bailey's guilt. The knowledge that she was responsible for taking three lives—however innocently—is an affront to her identity, to her very being.

To punish herself, she closets herself within a laboratory, closing herself off from well-meaning friends and colleagues who seek to lessen her distress. In her tormented state, she believes she doesn't deserve comfort—only blame.

Dr Bailey's suffering is so acute because she's invested so much of her identity into her profession (and the belief that she saves lives). In contrast, if your hero's job is just a way to pay his bills, then a career setback is unlikely to cause him psychic distress, and correspondingly, will usually elicit a less intense emotional reaction from audiences.

The same principle applies to embarrassment, which we analyzed earlier. If a hero's identity is somehow tied to the embarrassing incident, his embarrassment is going to be more acute, perhaps verging into the territory of embarrassment's darker cousin, humiliation.

Think of Torrance Shipman, the spunky heroine of *BRING IT ON*. Torrance lives and breathes cheerleading. In fact, she's the proud captain of the Rancho Carne Toros, a squad which has won the national championships five years in a row. To Torrance's dismay, she learns that these trophies were earned by stealing routines from an inner-city squad. This year, to compete in time for regionals without using a stolen routine, she hires a wacky choreographer to design a new routine for the Toros.

Unluckily for Torrance, this choreographer has sold the same routine up and down the California coast. When it's time for her squad to compete at regionals, the judges—and the fans in the stands—have already witnessed the same routine being performed by another competitor. Torrance and her cohorts do their best, smiling through their mortification. When they finally conclude their performance, the entire auditorium is silent.

Completely and utterly silent.

This may not seem like a big deal to you, and it certainly wouldn't faze James Bond, Han Solo, Scarlett O'Hara, or Erin Brockovich. But to a cheerleader who lives for applause, this silence is akin to *death*. That's what I love about this example. It's so specific to this heroine and to this story world.

Returning to the *STAR WARS* universe provides us with another example of how to wound a hero by undercutting specific aspects of his identity. (It's from the climax of *THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK*, not its trough, but it's so powerful, I had to include it.)

Towards the end of the classic film, Luke duels Darth Vader, who manages to dice off Luke's hand with his lightsaber.

Despite his physical agony, Luke valiantly continues to fight. But then Vader delivers a different kind of blow, this time confessing that he is, in fact, Luke's father.

Whoa.

Luke has now spent two movies trying to overthrow Darth Vader and the Empire Vader serves. Luke's a key member of the rebellion, a staunch supporter of liberty. His role in the resistance movement is a core part of his identity.

Learning that the blood of one of the most despicable and tyrannical villains in this galaxy flows in *his* veins would crush Luke. (It would also put the hand-dicing incident into a new perspective. Luke was dismembered *by his own dad*.) I don't think words can adequately communicate the extent of Luke's agony at this moment. Fortunately, Luke's psychic wounds do not permanently fell the intrepid rebel, and, in the third installment of the franchise, he continues his mission to bring freedom to this far-away galaxy.

Before we move on, there's one last form of psychic pain that I'd like to address, and that's when you wound your hero by destroying *extensions* of his identity. These are usually, but not always, inanimate objects.

These extensions could be comprised of an antique car, lovingly restored on the weekend; a garden bed of prize-winning roses which receive more attention than the children; or a keepsake from a long-deceased parent which occupies the prime spot on the mantelpiece. At your hero's trough of hell, the car would be totaled, the garden bed would be trampled, and the keepsake would be smashed into smithereens.

The Pixar film *UP* gives us a wonderful example to study. The main character, Carl, is a reclusive curmudgeon who dearly misses his deceased wife, Ellie. Together, they had planned to go on several adventures, but something always prevented them from traveling. In a desperate attempt to go on one last journey, Carl ties thousands of balloons to his home, and plans to navigate the air-borne structure to South America, a trip Ellie would've thoroughly enjoyed.

During one part of Carl's trough of hell, the villain, a mentally-unhinged explorer, sets Carl's house on fire. This home, with all of its mementoes and memories, is Carl's last tie to the wife he cherished. Losing the home is like losing Ellie all over again, which to Carl, was like losing a part of himself. That's exactly why the mentally-unhinged explorer targeted the house. He understood how much its destruction would hurt Carl's psyche.

Because Carl's devotion to Ellie is at the emotional core of the film, the partial destruction of Carl's home plays a key role in his trough of hell. But in most circumstances, showing the breakdown or decay of an object closely tied to your hero's identity is not going to be the centerpiece of his Act Two demise. It's usually more of a grace note, a way to add one more "nick" to cap your hero's string of calamities.

Although this kind of psychic pain typically involves the destruction of an inanimate object, it's not limited to tangible items. At your hero's trough of hell, he could lose something intangible, like his empire, or something animate, like a pet.

The most famous example in cinema is probably from *THE GODFATHER*, which incidentally doesn't affect the hero, but one of his opponents. When a Hollywood producer refuses Don Corleone's offer, the producer wakes up to discover the decapitated head of his prized stallion in his bed.

Despite the notoriety of this example, I caution you to be extremely wary of injuring animals in your script. Your villain may very well think nothing of killing your hero's prized pooch, but this act of violence, understandably, doesn't usually sit well with audiences.

In *BATMAN BEGINS*, the villain achieves the hat trick of destroying both tangible and intangible psychic extensions of the hero, multimillionaire Bruce Wayne. Through a series of flashbacks, we learn that Dr Wayne—Bruce's father—was murdered. Besides a grieving son, the physician left only three things behind: Wayne Manor, the family name, and a legacy of philanthropy. By the end of Act Two, the villain has managed to either completely or partially destroy all three.

Fortunately, during the climax, Bruce saves Gotham City from attack, maintaining his father's greatest legacy. Interestingly, early on in the movie, Bruce had expressed the desire to destroy Wayne Manor himself. It's filled with too many painful recollections. But now that the villain has taken care of the job for him, Bruce reverses course, and intends to rebuild Wayne Manor "brick by brick."

This admission is particularly important because it's reflective of Bruce's character growth. Filled with guilt and anger over his parents' deaths, Bruce is close "to wishing they had never existed so that he'd be spared from the pain of their

loss.” By rebuilding Wayne Manor, the film demonstrates that Bruce is free of the anger and hatred which threatened to consume him and destroy his remaining ties to his heritage.

When you inflict psychic pain upon your screenplay protagonist, you wound his very core. It’s one of the most sophisticated ways to bring a hero to his knees. Admittedly, it’s difficult to do well. Hopefully, the examples above have clarified this concept and will enable you to wield this technique with ease.

A Few Caveats

To be clear, the distinctions between physical, emotional, psychological, and psychic pain are entirely my own. These are not definitions taken from a psychology text, and might not mean the same thing within a clinical context.

Furthermore, when you’re writing the end of your second act, it’s not critical to distinguish what kind of pain type you’re inflicting on your hero. Indeed, sometimes making a distinction is just a matter of semantics.

However, it certainly can be helpful to make such distinctions, especially during the revision process. In particular, knowing the specific nature of your hero’s pain can help you determine what other elements in your script you might want to accentuate.

For instance, if your hero loses his job at the end of Act Two, you’d have to show how his identity is invested in his profession in order to create a psychic wound with emotional impact. But if your hero’s identity isn’t closely tied to his job, then maybe your hero’s dismissal is just a grace note, and you wouldn’t have to use up limited screenplay real estate to show your hero at his workplace.

For another hypothetical scenario, let’s pretend that you’re writing a screenplay about a widow whose husband dies at the beginning of your script. Unless they have an extremely strained relationship, she’s obviously going to be experiencing emotional pain.

If he’s the only breadwinner in the family, and they’ve just used up the last of their savings to pay for his medical care, and she has to pay a college tuition bill or property taxes in three months, then she may be in acute psychological distress as well. Alternately, if, for whatever reason, her identity is defined through her husband’s, then her ensuing psychic pain may manifest as confusion and disorientation as she figures out who she is, without her spouse.

Identifying the particular pain type you’re inflicting upon your hero may also lead to modifications in your hero’s backstory. For example, in *MONSTERS, INC.*, a monster named Sulley discovers that his boss (and mentor), Mr. Waterhouse, is corrupt and cruel. It’s a devastating blow to the loyal and trusting hero.

Let’s pretend for a minute that you had written *MONSTERS, INC.* In your first draft, Mr. Waterhouse’s deceit was exposed. BUT, in this draft, the villain was only Sulley’s boss—not his mentor. In this case, because Sulley takes pride in his position as a “scarer,” he’d be in a great deal of psychic pain.

Still, you aren’t satisfied. Following Vonnegut’s recommendation to be a sadist, you want to make Sulley’s trough even worse. Suddenly, it dawns on you that it would be even more devastating for Sulley to learn that his own mentor, the monster who taught him everything he knows, orchestrated fraud. This would intensify Sulley’s psychic pain, as he realizes that he put his trust into the wrong person. The mentor-mentee relationship also implies that Sulley and Mr. Waterhouse were not just colleagues, they were friends too. Mr. Waterhouse’s deceit would therefore end that friendship, injecting Sulley’s trough of hell with a dose of emotional pain.

With one simple tweak—turning Mr. Waterhouse from boss to mentor—*MONSTERS, INC.* significantly heightened the emotional impact of Sulley’s trough. (Note: we’ll examine other ways Sulley is hurt in Part V of this book.)

That is the whole point of this section: to help you see how you can use different pain types to amplify the depth of emotional response audiences will experience at this point in your story. The deeper their emotion, the more engaged they will be, and the more likely you will benefit from word of mouth recommendations.

Genre and MPAA Ratings

In one of [the writing blogs](#) I visit, a commenter expressed displeasure with Vonnegut’s recommendation to be a sadist. In her view, it gives authors “license to be completely over the top in the use of emotional and literal violence in stories.” She then mentioned that she’d been recently re-watching *THE COSBY SHOW*, and observed how enjoyable it was, even

though “truly awful things didn’t happen to anyone.”

This commenter raises an extremely good point. I have fond, albeit dim, memories of THE COSBY SHOW. Although I can’t recall specific events from a single episode, I’m absolutely, positively 100% certain that Dr Cliff Huxtable did go through some kind of hell, *only his pain was appropriate for the tone and story world of the series.*

Despite THE COSBY SHOW’s lack of violence, its writers were most definitely sadists. If they had been too kind-hearted, Dr Huxtable would’ve lived in utter bliss and contentment. Nice for him, but boring for audiences. The show wouldn’t last one season, let alone eight.

As a screenwriter, you must take both genre and MPAA ratings into account when crafting your hero’s trough of hell. (Character too, but that’s a slightly different issue.) Agony is going to mean one thing in a G-rated family comedy, another thing in an R-rated romantic comedy, and something else altogether in an R-rated thriller.

A Note about Children

You need to tread with caution whenever a child is harmed or threatened in your screenplay. And you have to tread with even more caution when children are a key component of your target audience.

Notice that in HOME ALONE, eight-year-old Kevin McCallister is never in any deep danger. Marvin catches him by the cuff of his pants, but Kevin quickly extricates himself. Later, at the climax, the smalltime crooks hang Kevin from a doornail, and Harry bites Kevin’s finger.

The scene is scary, but the degree of menace is appropriate for both the story and for the little kiddies in the audience. (The fact that the adult burglars bear the brunt of the pain is another way the film honors the sensitivities of children even as it entertains them.)

In the case of Harry Potter, the audience grew older along with Harry, enabling JK Rowling to write progressively darker books. If you’re writing a children’s film and you’re uncertain if you’re pushing things too far, it might be helpful to compare the first, second, third, and sixth films to the rest in the series. THE SORCERER’S STONE, THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS, THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN, and THE HALF-BLOOD PRINCE were rated PG while the others were all rated PG-13.

Finally, I also encourage you watch TOY STORY 3, and then read some of the one-star reviews on Amazon. Parents criticized the movie which they found “dark and depressing” and which their young ones found frightening. Even if you disagree with their assessment, this will at least give you a sense of which things a portion of the movie-going public considers scary and unsuitable for children.

That’s not to say MPAA ratings should dictate your story. You shouldn’t allow them to obstruct you from telling a good yarn. But if you’re writing a movie about children and/or intended for children, and there’s a niggling voice in the back of your mind which questions the level of violence and/or darkness in your script...it’s probably correct. Listen to it, and use the tips above to assuage its concerns.

Rate of Infliction

There are two basic approaches to wounding your hero at the end of Act Two. One method, what I like to call “death by medieval mace” knocks your hero out with one deadly blow. In the other approach, which I’ve dubbed “death by one thousand steady cuts,” the delivery of pain is more staggered. It unfolds like a country song: first you take the hero’s truck, then his home, then his wife, and finally, his dog.

Let’s examine each one in turn:

DEATH BY MEDIEVAL MACE

If you’re not familiar with the art of ancient warfare, a mace is, as defined by [Wikipedia](#), “a blunt weapon, a type of club that uses a heavy head on the end of a handle to deliver powerful blows. A mace typically consists of a strong, heavy wooden or metal shaft, often reinforced with metal, featuring a head made of stone, copper, bronze, iron, or steel.” Although maces were used throughout history, I like to focus on the medieval period mostly because it sounds cooler than “death by the Paleolithic mace.”

During your hero's trough of hell, he should feel like he's in the middle of a medieval battlefield, raising his arms to proclaim his victory, when suddenly, he's hit on the back of the head.

HARD.

Typically, your hero isn't just stunned by the blow. He's completely blindsided by it. Because this blow is so painful, so unexpected, and so devastating, even though it's only inflicted once, it's enough to thoroughly derail him. Regardless of the kind of pain your hero experiences (physical, emotional, psychological, psychic, or a combination of these), the net effect is the same.

Your hero is out of commission, (at least temporarily). After stumbling off of the battlefield, he needs time to mend his wound, regroup, and formulate the plan which will usually comprise the foundation of the third act.

Sometimes, your hero will resume pursuit of his goal on his own. More often than not, someone else will have to push him to take action, a topic discussed more in depth in *Part III: The Aftermath*.

To see the medieval mace in play, let's examine the spy thriller *SALT*. One of the CIA's most promising agents, Evelyn Salt, has been accused of being a Russian spy. Throughout Act Two, her motives are suspect. We don't know to which country her allegiance lies, although signs point to Russia. After assassinating the Russian president (in order to heighten tensions between the two countries), she reunites with her Russian mentor, Orlov.

He wields his mace masterfully, first praising Salt's skills. "Even I could not have hoped for so much. You are my greatest creation," he tells her. However, despite his praise, Orlov is still unsure of her loyalties.

Wielding his mace as a test, he murders Salt's husband in front of her very eyes. From Salt's reaction, it's clear that even she didn't anticipate such cruelty. While she's blindsided by the move, she's been trained well. She corrals her emotions, exhibiting stoicism despite her pain, and eventually exacts revenge at the earliest opportune moment.

The medieval mace can also be employed in less tragic ways. For example, in the underrated romantic comedy *WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS*, the romantic leads, Joy and Jack—high on self-pity and alcohol—get hitched. On the morning after, they realize that they loathe each other, and vow to get a divorce as speedily as possible. But before they depart from Vegas, they win three million dollars at the slot machines.

Due to the decree of a zany judge, they must prove they're working on their marriage before he'll grant their divorce and divvy up the jackpot between them. However, if one of them cheats on the other, the injured party can secure the divorce *and* keep all of the money. For this reason, Jack seeks out Joy's former fiancé, Mason, who thoroughly decimated her heart—and her self-esteem—in order to convince Mason to reconcile with Joy.

Of course, since this is a romantic comedy, Joy and Jack end up having genuine feelings for each other and call a ceasefire to their acts of sabotage. Before Joy and Jack openly acknowledge these feelings, Mason seeks Joy out and tells her that he wants her back and that he was wrong to let her go.

When Joy realizes that Jack is behind Mason's sudden change of heart, she's crushed. She trusted Jack. Without meaning to, she's given him her heart, and now he's betrayed her. That is why this emotional blow hurts so much.

As one last example, let's examine *THE BLIND SIDE*. Son of a drug addict, and in and out of foster homes, Michael Oher is on the fast track to nowhere. But then he's taken in by Leigh Anne Tuohy, who opens up her home, heart, and wallet to the boy.

Thanks to these resources, he turns his life around, becoming star of the high school football team. During his senior year, he's a top athletic recruit chased by college coaches from around the country. Eventually, Michael settles on Ole Miss, alma mater of his adopted family. And that's when the mace blow falls.

The NCAA suspects foul play. Like a small attack dog, a representative of the organization interrogates Michael. She threatens his future, now full of promise. Even worse than that, she causes him to question the Tuohy family's motives.

Was there a hidden agenda behind their altruism? Did they really accept him as one of their own, or did they merely see him as a means to improve Ole Miss's football team?

What's interesting about this example is that the mace blow is a surprise to the hero—but not to the audiences, who

witnessed scenes of the NCAA interrogation at the film's beginning. A number of movies employ this pattern and start with a scene taken from the hero's "all is lost" moment. This approach is beneficial since it gets audiences emotionally involved from the very first second.

Still, you should be wary of employing this technique yourself because it can become a crutch. It's easy to rely upon the scenes from the hero's trough to engage audiences right away—and not truly invest your creative energies in the scenes which follow.

No matter how riveting those initial scenes are, if the ensuing scenes end up being lackluster—especially the introduction to your hero's everyday world—audiences will disengage from your story. Remember, it's not enough to capture audience attention; you've got to sustain their interest as well.

Although the above examples demonstrate the power of the medieval mace, it's actually used quite rarely. In most movies, the hero isn't harmed through a single, devastating blow. Instead, the hero is pummeled in a series of scenes. We'll cover this rate of pain infliction next.

DEATH BY ONE THOUSAND STEADY CUTS

In ancient China, the perpetrators of particularly egregious crimes could be punished by slow slicing, aka death by one thousand cuts. Parts of the criminal's body would be methodically removed with a knife over an extended period of time.

Similarly, during your hero's trough of hell, he can experience a series of meaningful losses, or "cuts" over a period of time—rather than being instantly felled by one blow as with the medieval mace. Despite the pain of his multiple wounds, the hero will forge ahead. That is, until the accumulation of his injuries (temporarily) brings him to his knees. Typically, one wound in the series of cuts will trump the rest. It may have more of an impact on the hero, on the audience, or on the story as a whole.

Take the fantasy action-adventure *SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN*. After Snow White joins forces with the Huntsman and her childhood friend, William, she experiences a string of losses. First, a mystical animal known as the White Hart is shot with an arrow before her very eyes (cut #1). Then, Gus, one of the dwarves she has recently befriended, is killed (cut #2). But it gets even worse for the fairy tale princess.

Betraying her trust, William gives Snow White a poisoned apple (cut #3). (It's actually the evil queen Ravenna in disguise, but Snow White doesn't realize that immediately.) Finally, the poisoned apple works its magic, taking Snow White out of commission (cut #4), until she's revived by true love's kiss.

While audiences would be startled by the Hart's disintegration and by William's deception, it's the deaths of Gus and Snow White which produce the most sorrow. But between the two, Snow White's death has more emotional impact. Having spent significant time with Snow White and having witnessed Ravenna's cruelty firsthand, audiences would be emotionally aligned with the orphaned princess, and feel great sadness at her death.

Because they've spent far less time with Gus (his screentime thus far amounts to approximately 15% of the film), their emotional connection to him would be less. Consequently, so too would be the intensity of their grief. Furthermore, since Snow White is the heroine of the story, her death has a far greater effect on the plot as a whole.

In the above example, the worst wound (Snow White's death) was inflicted via the main plot (or A story) in the script. Oftentimes however, the most devastating wound stems from setbacks incurred via a subplot (B story, sometimes even C story). This makes sense since the emotional core of many screenplays is usually contained within a subplot.

Let's examine Guy Ritchie's *SHERLOCK HOLMES* as an example. The A story revolves around Holmes's attempts to thwart the villain, a mysterious lord who apparently has the ability to rise from the dead. The B story, which contains the movie's heart, centers on Holmes's friendship with Dr Watson—and the divide caused by the latter's impending marriage.

During his trough of hell, Holmes experiences a myriad of wounds, which culminate in his arrest by a Scotland Yard Inspector (whom we were led to believe was one of Holmes's allies). This is not only a shocker, it's also a major setback in the A story of the movie. After all, how can Holmes thwart the villain's nefarious schemes if Holmes is sequestered (not to mention handcuffed) in the office belonging to one of the villain's accomplices?

While this is the worst blow to the A story, it's not the one which has the most emotional impact on Holmes (or the

audience). That distinction belongs to previous scenes in which Holmes, Watson, and Holmes's love interest flee from a factory rigged with a booby trap. When the factory explodes, Watson bears the brunt of the damage.

Watson would've never been in harm's way if Holmes hadn't cajoled Watson into solving the mystery in the first place. With his superior intellect of which he is so proud, Holmes also should've been able to foresee the explosion and protect his friend. Wracked with guilt, Holmes wallows in emotional and psychic anguish, which debilitates him far more than being temporarily handcuffed.

In screenplays with ensemble casts, each protagonist will typically experience an individual wound, which translates into a series of steady cuts on-screen. That being said, there's usually one character, typically at the group's epicenter, who emerges as the movie's main protagonist. The cut which wounds this central character often has the most impact on audiences as well as on the story as a whole.

Which Rate of Infliction Should YOU Use?

The answer to this question, naturally, depends on your story. While death by medieval mace is highly effective, in practice, it's not used that often. Death by one thousand steady cuts is implemented far more frequently, primarily because it enables you to accomplish multiple story goals.

The more "cuts" your hero experiences, the more complicated his life becomes, and the more conflict your screenplay will contain. Additionally, creating a moment of emotional impact which simultaneously fulfills genre requirements usually necessitates harming your hero in more than one manner.

In action movies, the hero's body is often wounded in a dramatic sequence, which is capped by an emotional wound. (I like to think of this as the punch to the gut, slice to the heart combo.)

However, if your screenplay is a "two-hander" which tracks the lives of two protagonists, the medieval mace method may be ideal. As a generic example, at the beginning of your story, Hero A and Hero B may detest each other. But as your script progresses, they begin to smooth out their differences.

At the end of Act Two, Hero A makes a devastating discovery about Hero B, who has somehow betrayed him. That's mace blow #1. Hero B, unaware that everything's gone hinky, is completely oblivious, until Hero A confronts him. That's mace blow #2. In other words, the blow from the first mace to one protagonist then causes a second blow to the other protagonist.

We can return to WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS to see this technique in action. Devastated by Jack's betrayal (initiated when they were at odds with each other), Joy rounds on Jack, who's completely stunned.

Despite their contentious start, he thought that everything was going well between him and Joy. His cheerful expression before their divorce court hearing begins indicates that he probably nursed hopes that he and Joy could put all of this behind them and start fresh.

Now, as she wields her mace, telling the judge she doesn't want any of the money from the casino jackpot, only a divorce, it's Jack's turn to be devastated. (Notice that even though this story uses a "double-headed" mace approach, because both blows elicit an emotional response from audiences, the effect on them is the same as if the movie had used the one thousand cuts rate of infliction.)

The swift nature of the medieval mace approach is one of its major benefits. Once your hero is knocked over, you can quickly segue into the next part of your story. In most cases, the same can't be said for the one thousand cuts method. While you want to elicit a strong emotional reaction from audiences by multiplying your hero's wounds, at the same time, you also need to maintain the momentum of your story.

You can't sacrifice one for the other.

If you prick your hero for too long, audiences can become desensitized to his pain—creating exactly the opposite effect than you intend. Even if audiences don't become immune to your hero's suffering, you can still alienate them if his series of losses is too lengthy, causing the second act to drag on forever. To avoid making this mistake, review the sections on timing, duration, and pacing in *Part IV: Parameters and Guidelines*.

Key Characteristic #2: It's Emotionally Wrenching

If there's only one lesson you take away from this book, it should be this: the trough of hell must elicit some significant degree of emotion from audiences. Otherwise, it's about as useful as a flat tire.

As far as emotional reactions go, tears are great, but not always probable. Wide eyes and an involuntary gasp work equally well. Whether expressed through tears or gasps—or something in between—if *successful, the trough of hell recharges audiences' emotional investment in your hero's success all over again.*

To elicit the strongest degree of emotion, the story events comprising your trough must of course honor your characters, theme, and story world. (We'll discuss how these events specifically manifest themselves in *Part II: The Seven Common Trough Types.*)

But if a trough fails to intensify audiences' emotional involvement, it doesn't necessarily signify that you've chosen the wrong events to comprise your hero's trough.

Changing them might not fix your story. Often, the solution will involve retooling prior elements in your screenplay, usually all the way back in Act One.

Indeed, many of the tips in this book are really roundabout ways of heightening and accentuating audiences' emotional reaction to your hero's trough of hell. The techniques in this section are more direct, cutting to the heart of the matter, and as such, should be an integral part of your screenplay writing strategy.

If you write by the seat of your pants, pay special attention to them when you're revising your rough draft. If you plot your screenplay in advance, make sure to incorporate them into your script outline and then evaluate their effectiveness during your revisions.

Emotional Amplification Technique #1: Demonstrate the Value

You must show the audience the value of whatever the hero loses during his trough of hell. One of the worst mistakes you can make is to assume that its value is obvious.

Naturally, audiences will recognize the worth of objectively valuable items—whether they are tangible like a diamond necklace or intangible like a decades-long friendship. Even so, you will intensify the emotional impact of the trough of hell if you take the time to show the audience how and why *this* particular item is valuable to *your* hero.

For instance, in the action movie TAKEN, Kimmy Mills, the teenage daughter of former CIA agent Bryan Mills, is abducted by a prostitution ring. Clearly, in this situation, a screenwriter doesn't have to explain how or why Kimmy is valuable to her dad.

However, with the addition of a few more background details, screenwriters Luc Besson and Robert Mark Kamen made this horrendous loss even more horrifying.

We learn several things about Bryan during the film's beginning. Bryan's job kept him away from home, so he missed most of Kimmy's childhood. Now, he's retired, and he's taken up residence in an apartment near Kimmy (who lives with her mother and her mother's new husband).

The apartment's crummy, but Bryan doesn't mind. Its proximity to Kimmy is all that matters. He's also obsessive in selecting the perfect gift for Kimmy's birthday. This detail not only shows us how hard he's trying to rebuild their relationship, but also establishes his meticulous personality (which makes later events more credible).

If Bryan doesn't find Kimmy in time, he loses her—and the precious chance of reconciliation. At the end of Act Two, she's sold at an auction, and he's caught by the villains.

It seems impossible for Bryan to rescue his daughter, let alone make amends with her. The desperation audiences feel on Bryan's behalf in this moment is intense *because they've witnessed Bryan trying so desperately to win back Kimmy's affection at the film's beginning.*

Imagine if Bryan and Kimmy had the perfect father-daughter relationship at the movie's outset. Then imagine that their

relationship was strained, but the movie didn't spend time showing Bryan's efforts to please Kimmy.

In either scenario, do you think the trough would've had the same level of emotional impact?

For a less distressing example, we can examine *THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT*. The main plot of the film revolves around the widowed US President, Andrew Shepherd, and his courtship of an environmental lobbyist, Sydney Ellen Wade.

As you would expect in a movie set in the White House, this blossoming romance shares the spotlight with political maneuvering. At the film's outset, we learn that the president is enjoying high favorability ratings—63% to be exact.

But Shepherd's relationship with Sydney, which becomes tabloid fodder, causes his approval ratings to plummet. At a Christmas party, we learn that in five weeks, they've plunged to a low of 46%. By the end of Act Two, they've hit a low of forty-one, and several Beltway insiders feel that Shepherd's numbers aren't likely to rebound.

You don't have to be a political science major to understand that this ratings dip represents a significant political loss. Nevertheless, political ratings make for dry subject matter, and by themselves, are unlikely to garner emotional investment from audiences.

However, the movie took the time to show why these ratings specifically mattered to the president. They will a) help him push a crime bill, his top priority, through Congress and b) make running for a second term (it's re-election year) much easier.

In other words, the ratings don't exist in a vacuum, included to add a touch of authenticity to the Oval Office backdrop. *The ratings have been given a context, a context onto which audiences can latch their emotion.*

Admittedly, the president's ratings nosedive doesn't have the same emotional impact as his break-up with Sydney. That's actually why I like this example so much. The loss is meaningful, but at a subtle level of small-scale intensity.

From these examples, you can see that making minor changes to your hero's backstory (ie Bryan is estranged from his daughter; it's a re-election year for President Shepherd) can profoundly alter the emotional impact your trough of hell has on audiences. To drive the point home, let's examine a few movies which missed opportunities to deepen the emotional intensity of their Act Two ending.

Earlier, I mentioned that Snow White experiences a trough of the one thousand cuts variety in *SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN*. One of her "cuts" included witnessing the disintegration of a beautiful, majestic creature known as the White Hart, who was shot by an arrow.

While this moment is distressing—unlike the death of Aslan in *THE LION, THE WITCH, AND THE WARDROBE*—it doesn't have real emotional impact because we know next to nothing about the Hart.

One minute, audiences are being introduced to him, and in the next, he's shot. There isn't enough time for audiences to make an emotional connection with the Hart, so they have little reason to care about his loss.

Before the Hart is shot, one of the dwarves comments that by bowing before Snow White, the Hart has blessed her. That's a lovely sentiment, but it fails to communicate how this blessing can help Snow White defeat Ravenna. Since the Hart's disintegration appears to have no effect on the main plot of the story, his termination is rather gratuitous.

Imagine, for a second, that Snow White had spent a good portion of the movie looking for the Hart because he could, temporarily at least, make her as invincible as Ravenna. And now, with the help of the dwarves, she's found the Hart—only to have the villain's henchmen wrench him away at the last second.

With this change, the Hart's loss would have deeper emotional impact since we'd know exactly why he's valuable to Snow White.

Consider yourself forewarned: meting out needless wounds to create a trough of the one thousand cuts variety won't achieve the desired effect—not unless you've shown the value of what the hero loses in this moment.

Let's take a look at *THIS MEANS WAR*, another movie which failed to establish the significance of the item which the heroes lose during their trough of hell. FDR and Tuck, two spies (and best friends), fall in love with the same girl and use

their top-notch secret agent skills to outshine the other as prospective suitors.

Starring Chris Pine, Tom Hardy, and Reese Witherspoon, and opening around Valentine's Day, this action comedy should have raked in the dough. However, its box office take wasn't commensurate to its high-concept premise or its star power.

One explanation for this failure is its lackluster trough of hell. The competition between FDR and Tuck strains their friendship, and at the end of Act Two, the former amigos part ways.

The dissolution of FDR and Tuck's friendship, in a word, sucks. But just because it's a devastating loss for them, doesn't mean that audiences will automatically care about it. (I know I didn't.) That's because the friendship between the two spies—unlike the bromance between Holmes and Watson in *SHERLOCK HOLMES* or between John and Jeremy in *WEDDING CRASHERS*—came across as fairly shallow.

Sure, FDR tells Tuck, "you're my best friend, we're family." There are even avowals to take a bullet for each other. But, on the whole, the movie only gives lip service to their friendship. It doesn't demonstrate its value through the characters' actions, leaving audiences to draw their own conclusions about its meaningfulness to FDR and Tuck.

One more example: this one's from the 2010 remake of *CLASH OF THE TITANS*. The hero, Perseus, is tasked with saving the ancient city of Argos from the Kraken. Unleashed by the gods, the monster can only be killed with Medusa's head, which turns all who look upon her into stone.

At the end of Act Two, Perseus has secured Medusa's head. But his victory quickly turns into sorrow. After he exits Medusa's lair, he witnesses his love interest, Io, killed by a vengeful king.

The execution of this trough of hell is excellent. Io's death comes as quite a shocker. Since the backstory of the vengeful king was set up beforehand, his sudden appearance, while surprising, didn't strain all credibility. Nevertheless, this trough still falls flat because the film never really established Io's value to Perseus.

It devoted little time to their courtship. Instead, Io was used more as an exposition device, explaining the history of the gods, the history of Medusa, down to the history of Perseus himself.

For her loss to carry true emotional weight, the movie needed to show why—beyond the fact that she looks good in a toga—Perseus liked her.

There's another factor at work here too. Io had watched over Perseus since he was a baby, thrown into the ocean in a casket, until he grew up into a man. This makes her a prime candidate as a *maternal figure* for Perseus, not a romantic interest. The transformation from guardian to lover felt, to me, rather creepy, and therefore, was difficult to invest in emotionally.

It's also easy for writers—especially beginners—to err in the opposite direction. Instead of neglecting to show the value of what the hero loses at the end of Act Two, they hit audiences over the head with its import.

In this situation, they'd do well to remember the expression, "You can lead a horse to a trough of water, but you can't force him to drink." Likewise, you can't forcefully squeeze emotions from your audience. However, if you lay down the proper groundwork, once you lead audiences to your trough of hell, their emotions should flow naturally.

Over time, you'll develop instincts which will tell you when you've laid down too little or too much emotional groundwork. One of the best ways to develop these instincts is to monitor your own reactions to movies.

Which ones have made you feel the most intensely at the end of the second act? Why did you feel this way?

Which details do you think heightened your personal emotional reaction? Are those kinds of details in your own screenplay?

Did you ever feel like the movie was trying to forcefully extract an emotional response from you? Is that kind of heavy-handedness present in your own rough drafts?

If you record your responses to these questions on a regular basis, your instincts should develop very rapidly!

A Small Confession

It's time for me to make a small confession. I haven't given you the whole picture. Showing the value of what your hero loses at the end of Act Two is meaningless if audiences don't care a) about your hero's goal or b) about the hero himself.

Let's address the former first. You must give your audience a reason to care about whether your hero wins or loses. This reason comprises your story stakes.

In many instances, the stakes and the item the hero loses at the end of Act Two are, if not the very same thing, then intricately connected. In *THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT*, the stakes are comprised of the president's heart and his chances of re-election. During his trough, Andrew Shepherd loses both.

In *THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS*, if Clarice Starling doesn't succeed in extracting information from Hannibal Lecter, a young girl will die. At the end of Act Two, Clarice is forcibly ejected from the premises where Lecter is being kept, and loses all chances of access to him soon thereafter, when he engineers a daring escape. Although they are not synonymous with each other, these setbacks put the stakes in great jeopardy.

To see why this matters, let's return to *CLASH OF THE TITANS*. If audiences aren't invested in Perseus's relationship with Io, her death won't elicit a strong degree of emotion from them. On the other hand, if they care about Perseus's goal to save Argos, then that emotional investment *may* be enough to carry the film and create an Act Two ending with impact.

Ostensibly, audiences should automatically care about the destruction of an entire city. However, with the exception of its princess, Argos's wealthy citizens are a nasty, narcissistic, gluttonous lot. Frankly, the ancient world seems better off without them.

Of course, they are not the only ones affected by Argos's destruction. Many poor citizens will die too. But audiences are not given a chance to get to know them (unlike the wealthy inhabitants, with whom audiences have become acquainted through a scene in the royal palace). Sure, on an abstract intellectual level, no one in the audience wants to see masses of ordinary people senselessly destroyed.

But presenting stark reality isn't the best way to elicit emotion. Instead, the film should've harnessed the power of story, forging a connection between audiences and specific citizens of Argos. Screenwriter Scott Myers explains this perfectly [in an interview with Script Magazine](#):

"I read a lot of scripts and one recurring issue I find, regardless of genre, is **a lack of emotional resonance**. There can be all this huge stuff going on in the plot, literally in a sci-fi story at the scale of blowing up an entire planet, but if there aren't points of connection for a script reader to the story's characters, where we actually feel something authentic for them, then the effect can be so much noise. That's why I have this writing mantra: Substantial Saga / Small Story. That is whatever the big story is, what I call the Plotline, there have to be some intimate subplots and dynamics going on which engender a human connection between the reader and the characters."

Going back to our analysis of *CLASH OF THE TITANS*, the movie could've taken another tack with its Act Two ending. Instead of losing Io, Perseus could've experienced a major setback in his plan to save Argos, which would've tied the trough of hell loss to the story stakes.

For this to be successful, the movie would also have to incorporate, subplots or, to borrow Myers's expression, "small stories," about the denizens of Argos. Because audiences would be given the opportunity to invest their emotions into the denizens' well-being, Perseus's setback would consequently have meaning.

Another approach could involve the compassionate princess. She's someone audiences have gotten to know, and therefore, can care about. In the film, the citizens of Argos plan to sacrifice the princess to appease the gods, and hopefully, prevent their imminent destruction.

If Perseus fails in his mission, she will die. If she—and not Io—were his love interest, a setback during his trough of hell would be much more emotionally devastating. (As a matter of fact, the princess is Perseus's love interest in the original movie. I'm not sure why the remake decided to change that. Sometimes, originality has its price.)

Story stakes are not the only element needed to craft a screenplay with emotional impact. Another essential ingredient pertains to the relationship between audiences and the hero.

The emotional impact of your hero's trough of hell loss will be a function of how much audiences have become invested in him. This investment is often equated to the hero's likeability, although, as you'll see in the ABOUT A BOY case study in Part V, the two are not one and the same.

There are many different ways to get audiences' emotions invested in your hero from the get-go. We'll discuss two of the main ones here.

All the way back in Act One, your hero can either, as Blake Snyder puts it, "save the cat," or, to borrow Michael Hauge's terminology, your hero can be a victim of "undeserved misfortune."

Both techniques are equally straightforward. In the save the cat technique, audiences emotionally invest in your hero because he does something nice. (In his screenwriting guide *Save the Cat*, Snyder uses a wonderful example from ALADDIN to illustrate.)

Alternatively, audiences can emotionally invest in your hero because something bad happens to him, ie his undeserved misfortune.

In rare cases, the act of saving the cat leads directly to the hero's undeserved misfortune. This is part of the genius that is THE HUNGER GAMES. The heroine, Katniss Everdeen, saves her younger sister from participation in the Games. Katniss's reward? To play in the Games—a fight against better-trained opponents till the death—herself.

Who in the audience wouldn't be on board with Katniss after that?

Between saving the cat and subjecting your hero to misfortune, the latter is usually a stronger technique because it doesn't just appeal to audience sentiment. It also appeals to their sense of justice.

Done right, studio readers will keep reading and movie-goers will keep watching to see this wrong made right. This is why I think the save the cat technique isn't—as Snyder mournfully observed—used that often in Hollywood.

In the video commentary of JERRY MAGUIRE, Cameron Crowe mentioned that his intention was to start the film "where an 80s movie would've ended." A similar philosophy can be applied to brainstorming ideas for your hero's trough of hell loss at the end of Act Two.

Many of the possibilities you generate could form the basis of your hero's undeserved misfortune at the beginning of your script (perhaps as the inciting incident or part of your hero's backstory) rather than its Act Two ending.

Oh, and if you've ever been confused about the inciting incident, and wished someone would explain it to you without fuss and with lots of examples, check out my screenwriting guide, [Inciting Incident: How to Begin Your Screenplay and Engage Audiences Right Away](#).

Emotional Amplification Technique #2: Delineate the Contrast

In *The Hero's Journey*, Christopher Vogler muses on the "elasticity of emotion." In his words, "Human emotions, it seems, have certain elastic properties, rather like basketballs. When thrown down hard, they bounce back high. Depressing an audience's emotions has the same effect as holding an inflated basketball under water: When downward pressure is released, the ball flies up out of the water. Emotions depressed by the presence of death can rebound in an instant to a higher state than ever before."

Vogler's observations help explain why your hero's trough of hell needs to be so devastating. This state of distress makes his eventual victory so much sweeter. The neat thing is that the reverse holds true as well.

Your hero's trough will feel even more distressing if it's preceded by a moment of positive emotional valence.

This is due to the power of contrast. Although underutilized, it's one of the most effective ways to intensify the emotional impact of your hero's trough.

To see why, we'll have to abandon Vogler's basketball analogy for another. Imagine, for a second, that your hero's trough is a literal hole in the ground, approximately five feet deep.

Which would be more painful for your hero: falling into your 5-foot trough from a 1,000-foot hill or from a 10,000-foot

mountain?

In other words, even if you keep the hero's low point the same, you can intensify its impact by tweaking the events immediately prior to his trough of hell. The more you accentuate the difference, the greater effect the events comprising the trough will have on audiences.

Take HARRY POTTER AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX. Ninety-five minutes into the movie, the ever-mischievous Weasley twins let loose a storm of fireworks within the hallowed halls of Hogwarts, the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry.

Suppressed by the school's acting headmistress, Dolores Umbridge, the students are overjoyed at the sight of such exuberant celebration.

However, the festivities contrast sharply with what follows. Through a psychic connection to the villain, Harry witnesses his last remaining relative, his godfather Sirius Black, being tortured.

Before Harry can rescue Sirius, the young wizard is caught by Umbridge. She threatens to loosen Harry's tongue by employing a curse so harmful, it's outlawed. Sirius's torture and Umbridge's threat are negative events in and of themselves, but their contrast with the lively fireworks scene makes them feel even more intense.

LIAR LIAR is also a great example which illustrates the power of contrast. Even though he's unable to lie, attorney Fletcher Reede has managed to win a difficult court case.

Filled with delight, he rubs his victory into the face of opposing counsel and then crows about it to the packed courthouse. "Jordan fades back! Swoosh! And that's the game!" (This is accompanied by a very enthusiastic round of air basketball.)

Fletcher's moment of glory, however, has a short shelf life. Soon he's held in contempt of court, thrown into jail, and separated from his son.

Again, these are negative events in and of themselves, but their contrast to Fletcher's prior rambunctiousness makes his demise feel even more intense. (Its entertainment value is an added bonus.)

Another effective way to heighten the emotional effect of your trough via contrast is to tinker with sound.

In THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT, Sydney **pops** open a bottle of champagne to celebrate her career victory...before she's summarily fired. In UP, Carl and Russell **giggle** with delight as they witness the joyful reunion of a flightless mamma bird with her babies. But this joy is quickly curtailed by the arrival of the villain. In BRING IT ON, the crowd raucously **cheers** for the Toros when they take the stage, but at the end of their routine, the poor squad from Rancho Carne High is greeted with complete silence.

True, the full effect of playing with sound is better experienced on the screen, rather than on the page. All the same, it's still a nifty little trick to add to your repertoire.

For the record, your hero doesn't have to partake in a full-fledged celebration in order for you to harness the power of contrast. He merely needs to experience an emotional high which audiences can relate to.

For instance, in THE BREAK-UP, after spending the majority of the movie making her ex-boyfriend's life miserable, Brooke extends Gary an olive branch. Having bought tickets to a rock concert, she asks Gary to go with her. He says he'll meet her there.

Excited, Brooke arrives at the music venue and leaves Gary's ticket at Will Call. "He [Gary] should be here in a minute," she tells the ticket-taker with absolute certainty. "He's really...he's oddly tall, so, you won't miss him." Once inside, Brooke buys herself a beer, but then, in anticipation of Gary's imminent arrival, purchases two beverages instead of one. Only Gary never shows.

Dejected, Brooke slumps in her seat, while two thousand fans cheer on the band with giddy enthusiasm. Their joy accentuates Brooke's sadness, which is emphasized further by its contrast to the trusting and optimistic attitude she exhibited moments prior. That dive—from hope to disappointment—added a poignant edge to the scene and deepened its emotional impact.

If your screenplay makes use of dramatic irony, then perhaps, only audiences—and not your hero—will experience the requisite emotional high. *TRAFFIC* is a powerful example of this. Montel Gordon and his partner, Ray Castro, are two DEA agents who are protecting a witness whose testimony is critical to put away a local drug lord behind bars.

Unbeknownst to them, a drug cartel has hired a hit man, Flores, to take out the witness. To accomplish the job, Flores rigs the DEA vehicle with a bomb. Since audiences have been privy to Flores's action, they're under great tension as they observe Gordon, Castro, and the witness leaving the courthouse.

Fortunately, the witness is tired of being cooped up inside for two weeks, and he begs the agents to let him walk back to his hotel. Gordon accedes to his request because Castro wants to walk too. With the threat to the agents' lives seemingly averted, audiences breathed a collective sigh of intense relief.

But their relief is sadly short-lived. In the midst of following the group as they traverse through the courthouse parking lot, Flores is shot by a sniper. Castro rushes to his car to call an ambulance. When he enters the vehicle, it explodes, killing him instantly.

Audiences would certainly feel grief at this tragedy, but their grief would have a keener edge to it because of its contrast with the relief they experienced only moments before.

The use of contrast has an additional benefit besides heightening audience's emotional response. It also helps overcome the aura of inevitability which can surround the hero's end of Act Two loss. This setback is one which audiences may sense is coming, although they might not be able to predict how it's going to happen.

However, when the trough is presaged by an emotionally positive moment, it becomes more of a surprise, whose very unexpectedness makes the movie more enjoyable for audiences to watch.

To illustrate, let's examine the modern comedy *LEGALLY BLONDE*. Elle Woods is a California sorority girl who snags a coveted spot at Harvard Law. Still, everyone treats her like she has no right to be there. Through sheer determination, Elle manages to earn the respect of both her classmates and her professors. But at the end of Act Two, Elle discovers that this was all an illusion.

The professor who selected her to be a part of his prestigious intern program chose her because of her bust, not because of her brain. But he doesn't reveal his true intentions to her right away.

First, he praises Elle's intuition, initiative, and intelligence. These compliments lull the heroine—and the audience—into a false sense of security.

So when the blow finally falls, and his remarks turn from complimentary into predatory, Elle's low point not only has more emotional impact, it also has the added benefit of surprise.

We can see the same principle in action in *THE TWO TOWERS*, the second installment of *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* trilogy. Frodo, and his trusty companion, Sam, continue their weary trek towards enemy territory. Tasked with a weighty, seemingly impossible mission to destroy the ring of power, their spirits are heavy.

Coveting the ring himself, their guide, Gollum, adds to their burdens. But after a long internal battle, Gollum's more humane alter ego, Smeagol, takes over the creature's personality.

With uncharacteristic glee, Smeagol cavorts through the wilderness. With pride, he brings back two rabbits for the group to feast on and bickers companionably with Sam over the best way to cook them. It's a simple meal and, back home, would hardly be cause for celebration.

Nonetheless, it's a moment of normalcy in the midst of imminent doom, and as such, contains a notably positive aura. However, soon thereafter, Frodo, along with Sam, is captured. Because the preceding cookout scene was tinged with the faint air of festivity, this major setback is all the more unexpected.

Even when audiences know a blow is about to befall the hero, taking advantage of contrast can be effective. In the 80s classic *WORKING GIRL*, Tess McGill pretends that she is a colleague of her employer, Katharine Parker, not her secretary.

Eventually, Katharine discovers Tess's deceit. Having observed her discovery, audiences would conclude Tess's jig is

up. So when Katharine storms Tess's business meeting and exposes Tess as a fraud, it's hardly a surprise. And yet, the moment, despite its inevitability, is quite moving.

This is due, in large part, to the moments which preceded it. Before the meeting begins in earnest, Jack, Tess's business partner and romantic interest, confesses he loves her. During the meeting, Tess's corporate strategy is complimented. (At one point, some of the participants even clap in appreciation of her ingenuity.)

Tess scores a professional and personal coup, but with Katharine's maneuver, she loses both in one swoop. While these losses are painful, by virtue of contrast, Tess's fall from grace is more emotionally intense than it would've been otherwise.

Emotional Amplification Technique #3: Depict the Aggregate

During your hero's trough of hell, audiences not only feel the pain your hero is currently enduring but also the pain which results from all of your hero's previous losses. They're probably not reviewing a checklist in their heads, but subconsciously, they're responding to this cumulative effect.

As the saying goes, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Likewise, the emotional effect of your hero's accumulation of losses is greater than the effect of each individual setback.

This means that if you employ a trough of a thousand cuts, when you inflict the last wound upon your hero, it will likely have the most powerful effect on audiences, since they will be responding to the cumulative effect of all the wounds your hero has just suffered. But you don't have to hurt your hero with a string of cuts in order to take advantage of this technique.

Most movies exploit the effect of the cume without even realizing it. Act Two is all about the hero overcoming obstacles, but these small victories are not without their costs. Audiences can certainly feel the impact of these losses in addition to the major one your hero faces at the conclusion of the second act.

For instance, in *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE IV – GHOST PROTOCOL*, spy Ethan Hunt loses much before the movie even reaches its midpoint:

- at the beginning of the film, he's in a Russian prison cell (representing a loss of freedom)
- through gossip between other characters, it's hinted he's lost his wife too (this is especially emotionally wrenching for audience members who recall all he went through to save her in *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE III*)
- after being framed for an explosion at the Kremlin, his word means nothing
- even worse, he's disavowed by his organization, losing both its resources and protection
- to top it off, he witnesses his friend and mentor, the Secretary of the IMF, die in front of him

At the end of Act Two, the villain possesses authentic nuclear activation codes—the very thing Ethan's spent a good portion of the movie trying to prevent. This setback is huge all by itself, but its emotional impact has an extra degree of intensity because of everything else the spy has lost in faithful service to the government branch he works for.

There's another method you can use to intensify the cumulative effect of your hero's loss at the end of the second act. Even though it's not frequently employed, it produces even more potent results.

In this method, you must a) make the audience aware of tragic losses incurred by your hero before your screenplay even begins and then b) construct his trough of hell so that it contains echoes of this tragic backstory.

At the end of Act Two, audiences will subconsciously feel an emotional reaction correlated to BOTH events, even though only one of them is unfolding on-screen. In other words, the pity evoked by the former amplifies the emotion evoked by the latter.

This tragic backstory will frequently manifest itself as a rotten childhood, devoid of love or affection. If a hero who grew up with such deprivation manages to find love (platonic or romantic) during your screenplay, only to have it wrenched away from him at the end of Act Two, the anguish the audience feels on his behalf will multiply.

For instance, during John Beckwith's trough of hell in *WEDDING CRASHERS*, the happy-go-lucky divorce attorney loses both his romantic interest and his best friend (who's like a brother to him). Despite John's penchant for

manipulating women, at this low point, it's hard not to feel sorry for the guy.

Plus, John's backstory would amplify this sympathy. At the very beginning of the film, we learn that as a young boy, he lost both of his parents in a tragic accident a month before his birthday.

Now, as an adult, John's forged a new family (a brother via his best friend, a potential spouse via his love interest)—only to have it wrenched away from him all over again. If John hadn't been an orphan, his trough of hell still would've tugged at the heartstrings, but his backstory makes that emotional pull even stronger.

For another example, let's take a look at the classic *THELMA AND LOUISE*. Thelma's husband, Darryl, keeps a tight rein on his wife. When she plans to go on a weekend trip with her best friend Louise, Thelma first resolves to ask him for permission. Afraid that he'll say no—and unleash his barely controlled temper on her—she ends up skipping town without asking him.

Her road trip with Louise gives Thelma a taste of long-denied freedom from the man “who never lets her do anything fun.” Much like a tiger in a cage, she's expected to remain within the four walls of their home, while he gallivants till the wee hours of the morning, “doing God knows what.”

But Thelma and Louise's carefree jaunt evolves into something more sinister, and through a series of incidents, the two women become outlaws. En route to Mexico, they're stopped by a local police officer. In that moment, it seems that their chance for freedom has slipped through their fingers.

If they're taken into custody, Thelma will likely live a life behind bars, a fate which echoes the caged life she lived with Darryl, and in doing so, makes her future incarceration all the more tragic. In her own words to the officer, “Three days ago, we'd never pull a stunt like this, but if you met my husband, you'd understand why.”

One of the best examples of putting this emotional amplification technique into practice can be found in *AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN*. The beginning of the movie contains several flashbacks to the hero's childhood. Through them, we learn that after Zach Mayo's mom committed suicide, he was taken from his home in America and unceremoniously deposited into the custody of his self-absorbed father. A navy man stationed in the Philippines, Zach's dad had promised Zach's mother he'd come back for her. Only, he never did.

During part of his trough of hell, Zach discovers that Worley, his best friend from naval aviator training, has hung himself in the bathroom of a motel. Cradling his friend's lifeless head in his hands, Zach says in between sobs, “I was your friend. Why didn't you come and talk to me about it? You didn't even try. You didn't say good-bye to me.” This scene, taken in isolation, is heartbreaking. But when taken in context of Zach's tragic past, it has an emotional impact few movies can rival.

As the above examples demonstrate, in most cases, the effect of the aggregate is going to be quite somber. However, as *PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL* so aptly proves, it can also be used for humorous effect. In the high-seas swashbuckler, Captain Jack Sparrow's one goal is to reclaim his position as captain of the *Black Pearl*, from which post he was ousted through the devious machinations of his former first mate (and the *Pearl's* current captain), Hector Barbossa.

As part of his coup, Barbossa stranded Sparrow on a tiny deserted island, from which Sparrow escaped by using sea turtles tied together with human hair. (Well, that's how one legend goes.)

At the end of the second act, Barbossa has managed to banish Sparrow to the very same island! In acknowledgement of this echo of the past, Sparrow says, “That's the second time I've had to watch that man sail away with my ship.” Although his tone is mournful, the effect is quite amusing, in keeping with the light-hearted actioner.

A word of caution: while the effect of the aggregate usually involves some form of childhood deprivation, every hero can't be an orphan. Furthermore, whatever tragic backstory you concoct—as well as the way you choose to echo its loss—should come across as natural, not contrived. Remember, you're striving to write an original screenplay which flows organically.

In *AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN*, the suicide of Zach's friend is a natural outgrowth of all the preceding story events (primarily Worley's struggle to live up to his brother's reputation, his relationship with a “Puget deb,” and his ensuing devastation when this girl breaks off their engagement).

Hence, his death doesn't come across as a manipulative stunt designed to toy with audience emotions—not even when Zach makes direct reference to his own mother's suicide 2 minutes later.

Key Characteristic #3: It's Paradoxical

You've probably heard that the end of Act Two is the point in your screenplay when your hero is the furthest away from his goal. I thought that way too—until I started to compare the end of Act Two to its starting point.

Isn't the hero the furthest away from his goal at its beginning?

At Act Two's outset, he's usually clueless as to the true nature—or even identity—of the villain. Whatever skill he needs to accomplish his final goal is probably in its nascent stages. If he has to work with a group, their cohesion is poor. If he has to woo a woman, she's immune to his interest.

By the end of Act Two, these circumstances have changed. The hero knows the identity of the villain—now he just has to apprehend him. He's achieved at least semi-mastery of the skill he's been trying to learn. His team has learned to work together as a cohesive unit. The girl has finally succumbed to his charms.

In short, your hero has accumulated knowledge, training, and allies which put him in a superior position than when he started.

Still, there's something lacking. He could be haunted by personal trauma or specters of self-doubt which prevent him from using his full potential. He could be laboring under the burden of a false identity. He could be relying too heavily on a mentor, a love interest, or the organization who hired him instead of on his own resources. He could be just plain scared.

Or, he could be trying to achieve his goal by following the path of least resistance, an attitude that might gain him victory, but only partially so.

The trough of hell, as negative and unpleasant as it is, is exactly what your hero needs to push past his demons, to give up his crutches, to overcome his innate resistance to change.

Because your hero has hit rock bottom, he's desperate enough to take the path of *most* resistance and confront the very thing he was trying to avoid.

In the process, he'll blossom into the person he always wanted to be. In other words, this epic defeat contains the seeds of lasting victory.

The paradox of the trough of hell resonates with audiences because it is reflective of real life. In the natural world, for example, after spending weeks nurturing their babies, mother birds nudge their young ones out of the safety of their nest so that they learn how to stretch their wings and fly.

In medicine, treatments may temporarily bring about a worsening of symptoms before the patient gets better. In homeopathy, this is referred to as “the healing crisis.” In the professional arena, employees may dream of becoming entrepreneurs, but only take the critical first step after getting fired from their nine-to-five jobs.

If you examine the end of Act Two from this perspective, then success is not as far off as your hero imagines—he just has to hang in there a little while longer.

It certainly doesn't seem that way. Not to your hero, and certainly not to the audience. Therein lies the paradox!

Fantasy author JRR Tolkien was especially enamored of this concept. He even coined his own term for it: “eucatastrophe.”

In a DVD featurette on the special extended edition of *THE RETURN OF THE KING*, Tolkien scholars define eucatastrophe thusly:

“However dark and bad and terrible things seem, there is a moment of turning, a moment when dark is turned to light, when dawn dispels the night...the happy event ensues...comes out of evil. We have a very familiar term, you know, ‘catastrophe,’ which is a sudden turn from good to bad. And Tolkien said that, actually, there out to be the opposite of

this, eucatastrophe, which is the sudden and unpredicted and unpredictable turn from bad to good. Tolkien related the eucatastrophe to the story of Christ, to the idea that out of the tragedy of Crucifixion...could come salvation for all mankind. But he finds it not only in the Resurrection, but also, powerfully, in fairy tales.”

In Tolkien’s eyes, it seems that eucatastrophe is particularly applicable to the end of stories. It’s that moment within the climax, when it appears that, despite his best efforts, the hero will be defeated...only the tides suddenly turn in his favor.

While Tolkien focused on the eucatastrophe within the climax, the most important application for you is, in my opinion, the end of Act Two.

This paradox, of negative giving way to positive, manifests itself in a variety of ways, including the following:

Paradox Type #1: Unfettered Growth

In this type of paradox, the hero is typically reliant upon the support of his mentor or on the assets of his employer. But to vanquish the villain, the hero will have to let go.

Like most people, heroes are often resistant to change, and correspondingly, are reluctant to part ways voluntarily.

At the trough of hell, however, the choice is taken out of the hero’s hands. His mentor might die; his organization might cut him loose. Either way, although this is a devastating moment for the hero, it paradoxically contains the seeds of future victory.

STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE is a classic example. Until he’s killed by Darth Vader, Obi-Wan instructs Luke Skywalker in the ways of the Force. But Obi-Wan won’t be at hand to fight Luke’s battles for him.

Even though Obi-Wan manages to communicate to Luke from beyond the grave, Luke still has to learn to rely on his own instincts and to refine his mastery of the Force. As counterintuitive as it may seem, Luke’s development is facilitated by Obi-Wan’s death because this loss forces Luke to grow.

To put it another way, Luke’s separation from Obi-Wan in the first film helps prepare him for the trials he must endure in the second and third. In the commentary for RETURN OF THE JEDI, George Lucas summarizes this idea quite nicely: “There is a point, where the hero has to be left alone, on his own two feet, without anybody there to help him...at some point...all the props have to be taken away, and he has to face the evil monster alone.”

In order to free himself of crutches, a hero doesn’t have to look death in the eye. Instead, he can lose access to the resources of his employer. He may get kicked off of the case, or perhaps banished to another location (or department). This loss, paradoxically, is usually a blessing. The hero may lack critical resources, but he isn’t constrained by the rules of his organization. He’s free to act on his instincts.

Take MISS CONGENIALITY. Sandra Bullock stars as FBI Special Agent Gracie Hart, who poses as a contestant in order to prevent an attack on a beauty pageant. Thanks to gossip provided by her fellow contestants, Gracie believes that the FBI has good cause to monitor pageant coordinator Kathy Morningside.

Unlike Gracie, her boss doesn’t recognize the value of her insider knowledge and views her sources with unconcealed disdain. “Where are you getting your information? From a pajama party?” he asks mockingly.

During Gracie’s trough of hell, the FBI vacates the premises. Gracie loses access to all of their resources—including her beauty consultant Victor Melling—and stays behind as a private citizen.

But this setback is a blessing in disguise. It frees Gracie to follow her instincts and keep an eye on Morningside, who, as it turns out, was the mastermind behind a scheme to sabotage the pageant.

Paradox Type #2: Relationships of Substance

Romantic pairings drive many screenplays, so it should come as no surprise that these relationships are often at the crux of the paradoxical nature of the trough of hell. Frequently, this kind of paradox adheres to the expression, “absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

In other words, a hero isn’t able to recognize and/or acknowledge the true value of his object of affection—until he loses

her. For instance, in *WHEN HARRY MET SALLY*, Harry only realizes how much he needs Sally—as both a lover and a friend—after she cuts him out of her life.

One of my favorite examples of this paradox comes from *JERRY MAGUIRE*. Sports agent Jerry Maguire is handsome and suave, and yet, he can't stand being alone. He proposes to his assistant, Dorothy, out of neediness—not love. Although he's available to his clients twenty-four hours a day, he remains emotionally distant from his wife.

Feeling that she deserves more than an emotional wasteland for a husband, Dorothy breaks up with him. “On the surface everything looks fine,” she tells him earnestly. “I've got this great guy, and he loves my kid, and he sure does *like* me a lot. And I can't live like that. It's not how I'm built.”

If Dorothy hadn't broken up with Jerry, he would've been content to maintain the one-sided nature of their relationship, in which she invests whole-heartedly in him, while he keeps his authentic feelings under lock and key.

By losing Dorothy, Jerry is forced to overcome his tendency to wade in the shallow end of the emotional pool, and admit—to himself as well as to her (and her sister's divorced women's group)—how much he really needs her.

One of the most precious aspects of love is its implication of acceptance. When you truly love someone, you accept him (or her), flaws and all. This facet of love is problematic for heroes who are hiding their true identities from their love interests.

Such secrets are like bubbles in slabs of clay. If the bubbles aren't wedged from the clay, any item made from the slabs will explode when it's heated up in a kiln.

Likewise, when a hero persists in hiding his authentic self from the heroine, his secrecy—like those hidden bubbles—threatens to destroy his relationship from the inside out.

If a hero wants a true relationship, built on a strong foundation, it's imperative that he reveals who he is to his romantic partner. However, no one likes being lied to, and this revelation, as necessary as it is, jeopardizes the very relationship the hero seeks to strengthen.

In *WEDDING CRASHERS*, Claire Cleary is so attracted to John Beckwith, she questions her engagement to another man. But the John she's fallen for is somewhat of an illusion, a fake venture capitalist who pretends to sell woolen shirts and pants handmade by the homeless. During John's trough of hell, Claire's fiancé exposes John's true identity. John is not a kindhearted entrepreneur, but a con artist who picks up lonely women at weddings.

Naturally, Claire doesn't take kindly to this news, and John is forcefully ejected from the Cleary family compound. But this loss, paradoxically, is actually John's gain because it enables him to win over Claire based on his own merit (or lack thereof).

That's what makes the ending so satisfying. Claire not only jilts her overly aggressive fiancé for John, but joins in on John's mischief, as both of them (along with other characters) pose as folk singers from Salt Lake City to crash another wedding.

WORKING GIRL is another great example of how important it is for heroes to be authentic in order to forge relationships of substance. As Tess says to Jack, “I've got a head for business and a bod for sin.”

The trouble is, those brains and that body come packaged in the form of a secretary. But Jack doesn't know that. Tess has fooled him into believing she's his professional equal.

If Jack's feelings for her are real—and not shallow—then it won't matter. If she keeps up the pretense, Tess won't know if Jack is image-conscious or not. Only by dropping the charade can Tess discover the true depth of Jack's feelings.

Paradox Type #3: Acquisition of Knowledge

In order to develop a winning strategy for his climactic battle with the villain, a screenplay hero often requires critical information. But gaining this information is not without its costs.

To put it another way, in order to win, paradoxically, your hero must first lose.

We can see this paradox in play in Guy Ritchie's *SHERLOCK HOLMES*. During one part of Holmes's trough of hell, the detective is apprehended by a police inspector and taken to the private office of Lord Coward, a member of parliament and a pawn of the villain.

At that moment, it seems as if all is lost, and the villain will get away with his evil schemes. However, Holmes's ensuing confrontation with Coward enables Holmes to confirm where the villain will strike next—British Parliament. In fact, in a delightful reversal, Holmes *purposefully* orchestrated his capture in order to gain this critical piece of knowledge.

Another powerful example of this type of paradox comes from *COLLATERAL*. As mentioned earlier, during Max's trough of hell, the cab driver turns the table on the hit man holding him hostage, and purposefully drives his vehicle into a divider. Hell-bent on completing his fifth and final kill of the night, Vincent flees the site of the accident.

In the wreckage, Max discovers papers which reveal the identity of Vincent's final target, a prosecutor whom Max had bonded with earlier that evening. If Max hadn't been driven to desperate measures, he never would've learned the prosecutor was Vincent's next target—it's not like Vincent was going to volunteer the information—and consequently, Max never would've been able to save her.

This Act Two ending is brilliant because of how neatly it dovetails with Max's character development. In attempting to bring about his own destruction, Max broke free of Vincent's control, gained autonomy, and claimed his personal power. While most troughs of hell aid in a character's evolution, few are this transformative.

For the most part, Max had to grapple with Vincent on his own. Unlike Max, many screenplay heroes are blessed with teammates who can assist them. But a team is only as good as its weakest member. A hero can never achieve victory if one of his teammates has become corrupted, or in a worst-case scenario, was playing for the bad guys all along.

Although a hero wouldn't want to keep a traitor on board, he typically doesn't welcome the truth because the news is so emotionally devastating. Even so, as upsetting as the revelation is, this harrowing experience is ultimately beneficial.

Since the traitor's secret has come to light, he can no longer sabotage the hero when the hero squares off against his opponent during the climax. If the traitor's true allegiances had remained hidden until then, the hero would be in much greater trouble. (Note: we'll cover more specific examples of this kind of betrayal in the "The Vanishing Ally" section in Part II of this book.)

In the case of *FRACTURE*, the hero's trough of hell doesn't gain him new information, but new evidence. Prosecutor Willy Beachum goes through extraordinary lengths to prevent Mrs Crawford's husband from stopping her life support. In the end, Beachum fails. However, his defeat contains the seed of victory, or in this case, justice.

Now that Mrs Crawford is dead, the bullet which killed her can be extracted from her body. This bullet provides Beachum with a fresh piece of evidence he can use to convict Crawford. Without it, Crawford would've gotten away with (attempted) murder.

Paradox Type #4: Exit Strategy

Sometimes, the hero's trough of hell is necessary in order for him to escape. Like gaining critical information, this benefit is not incurred without great cost.

We've seen a couple examples of this already. In *COLLATERAL*, Max ejects himself from an untenable situation by engineering a car accident. Since Vincent shot LAPD detective Ray Fanning, the only person who believed Max's story, the accident is Max's only way out.

In *STAR WARS*, Obi-Wan's death also serves as a distraction, enabling Luke and his friends to board the *Millennium Falcon* and escape the Death Star.

Similar to *STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE*, in *RED*, a key character sacrifices himself in order for his friends to escape safely. What's interesting about this example is that this is the character's *second* death in the movie.

Early on, a hit man enters Joe's room, pointing a gun at his chest. In an artful example of misdirection, the ensuing scenes imply that Joe was killed. It turns out that the old geezer's reflexes were as quick as ever. Joe shot the assassin before the killer could pull his trigger. Later, when Joe reappears, he joins Frank and Marvin, his former CIA cohorts, to discover why the CIA is trying to eliminate them.

The trail leads to the home of a defense contractor. During Frank, Marvin, and Joe's confrontation with the contractor, CIA and FBI agents surround the home. In Joe's words, "Somebody's got to make the hard choice, if we're going to get out of here alive." For Joe, who's suffering from liver cancer, the choice is easier than most.

He embraces Frank, and then exits the manse, whereupon he is immediately shot. His death creates a diversion, enabling Frank and Marvin to escape. Because he willingly sacrificed his life, Joe's death is all the more poignant, sharply contrasting with the frenetic action sequences which precede and follow it. In my opinion, that combination—of action mingled with introspection—is something which elevates RED above the average action movie.

Like RED, KNIGHT AND DAY is an action movie in which one CIA agent, Roy, sacrifices himself to save someone else. Not for another agent, but for a regular ole New England gal, June Havens.

Although she's attracted to Roy, throughout the film, she questions his motivations. Does Roy have her best interests at heart? Is he telling her the truth? Does he really like her? Or is he just using her?

Towards the end of the second act, (by which point he's saved her life multiple times), June concludes that Roy is the good guy he claims to be and invites him to have dinner with her.

Roy accepts, but he has another appointment to honor first, one which involves negotiation with a beautiful woman in the employ of an international arms dealer. When asked about June, Roy replies, "She's a nobody. Just someone I picked up along the way."

Having ignored Roy's instructions to stay in her hotel room, June overhears this dismissive description of her. So when the CIA approaches June, she's ripe for the picking.

As the director of counter espionage explains to June, "You've been fed a steady diet of misinformation and fantasy by an agent of ours, who's recently gone rogue." The director then shows June airport security footage which reveals that Roy engineered their first meeting. He's been playing June from the very beginning.

Devastated by the betrayal, June turns the tables on him. Their intimate dinner date turns into a sting operation in which the CIA tries to capture Roy. But, as June comes to realize, Roy wanted her to follow him, wanted her to overhear everything, wanted her to collude with the CIA.

That was his exit strategy for her.

If she hadn't cooperated with the CIA and turned him in, the agency would've never let her return home. In playing the bad guy, paradoxically, Roy proved he was truly a knight.

Exceptions

Admittedly, some troughs are not paradoxical, or, to borrow Tolkien's terminology, some troughs are not eucatastrophic.

No good seed sprouts from the field of defeat; no benefit directly arises from the hero's harrowing experience.

For instance, it could be argued that the sleazy French pimp in TAKEN would've never revealed Kimmy's destination to Bryan if Bryan hadn't been safely cuffed up. But to say that Bryan's captivity was critical to rescue his daughter is stretching it quite a bit.

In TRAFFIC, we can't stretch the definition of paradox at all. Nothing positive, absolutely nothing, results from Castro's death. The witness Castro and Gordon were protecting is eventually assassinated, and the local drug lord they were hoping to put away behind bars is released soon thereafter.

Although this trough of hell isn't positive for the characters, it's certainly an effective plot beat, heightening audiences' emotional involvement with the film and underscoring its thematic message about the inefficacy of the drug war.

Nothing good emerges from the villain's obtainment of authentic nuclear activation codes in MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE IV – GHOST PROTOCOL. Nevertheless, it definitely kept movie-goers at the edge of their seats.

The same can be said for HOME ALONE. Getting temporarily caught by Marvin doesn't help Kevin McCallister save his home from the two bumbling burglars, but Marvin's reaction to Kevin's solution to his predicament—a big fat hairy

tarantula—is comedy gold.

To put it another way, a lack of a paradox doesn't automatically signify that the end of your second act is lacking.

At the end of the day, crafting the perfect trough of hell boils down to great storytelling, plain and simple. Examining THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS is a great way to illustrate this.

An attack by hyena-like creatures known as wargs results in one of the heroes (Aragorn) falling off of a cliff. Presuming he's dead, his comrades leave him behind.

There's nothing beneficial about Aragorn's painful experience. But his demise—along with his triumphant return—made for a gripping cinematic experience.

In fact, that was the whole point of this major deviation from the source material. As Peter Jackson (director and co-writer) explains in the commentary of the special extended DVD edition of the film: "Viggo's [Aragorn's] supposed death here is just really a way of trying to create that horrific moment in a film where you think one of the heroes has died...in THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING, we were much more fortunate because we had both Gandalf and Boromir actually dying...which really gave that story a lot of power...we certainly missed that here, and I think that's one of the reasons why we ended up sending Aragorn over the cliff as well...we just felt we had to put some weight into the story that wasn't actually there."

That's a great way to envision the trough: *it puts weight into your story at that point where audience interest typically wanes. Without it, all the story tension would go out the window.*

In the words of Philippa Boyens, another co-writer, "all those people who criticized it should just play it out to its logical conclusion, and not have Aragorn go over the cliff...and then see what it does to the tension of the story...and go from there."

In the commentary, Jackson does just that, concluding that without Aragorn's presumed death, the sequence turns into a "what's the point kind of moment" and a "a feast of special effects."

So, my friend, I ask you, what's the point of your Act Two ending? Is it a feast of special effects? Or is it something more?

Part II: The Seven Common Trough Types

In this chapter, we will focus on seven common ways that the trough of hell specifically manifests itself.

To be clear, this list is not exhaustive, but the trough types contained herein have a proven track record, successfully combining pain, paradox, and emotion.

I should caution you: this isn't paint by the numbers, plug and play kind of stuff.

Ending your second act with one of these events doesn't mean that your screenplay will avoid sinking into the Bermuda Triangle that is Act Two.

Using them doesn't mean that your script will automatically be engaging.

But they do give your imagination and muse something to work with.

That's their prime benefit. Instead of staring at a blank page, you have a place to take your story.

Eventually, you will discover the combination which *does* engage audiences to the greatest degree, while as always, remaining true to your characters and concept.

Cure-all? No. Shortcut? Definitely.

And who doesn't love shortcuts?

Trough Type #1: Hero Unmasked

This type of trough is typically integral to stories with a premise rooted in pretense. Throughout your screenplay, your hero has been pretending to be someone he's not.

He could be hiding his true status (WORKING GIRL, THE PRINCE AND ME, COMING TO AMERICA); his true agenda (10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU, HOW TO LOSE A GUY IN 10 DAYS, WHAT WOMEN WANT, MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING, MEAN GIRLS); or his true gender (MRS DOUBTFIRE, TOOTSIE).

Screenplays starring undercover agents are also prime candidates, whether they are comedies (MISS CONGENIALITY) or action movies (THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS, MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE III).

In other words, if longstanding pretense is built into your story concept, then unmasking the hero is a logical way to end your second act (although, as we'll see later, it's not your only option).

Invariably, once the hero is exposed, it produces another trough type—social alienation. In perpetuating his ruse, your hero has duped several individuals who don't take kindly to being lied to.

Therefore, the fallout of the unmasking is usually a foregone conclusion. As we discussed earlier, often, this temporary estrangement is paradoxically beneficial, ultimately strengthening the bond between the hero and the heroine.

In terms of creative investment, make sure to carefully select the character who does the unmasking. In general, you have four options:

THE RIVAL

If your hero is competing against another character (for a job, for love, for both), this rival can unmask the hero in order to eliminate the competition.

As we've already discussed, in WEDDING CRASHERS, Claire's fiancé eventually unmasks John's less savory identity as a manipulative wedding crasher.

THE DARK KNIGHT cleverly spins this trope into something completely different. Despite his intentions to reveal his identity as Batman at a press conference, Bruce Wayne doesn't come forward.

Instead, Harvey Dent—Bruce’s rival for the affections of a passionate district attorney, Rachel Dawes—does. By pretending *he* was the one engaged in a long-standing pretense, and consequently, taking on its fallout, Harvey Dent wins over Rachel’s heart for good.

THE ALLY

In this scenario, a friend of the hero, brimming with good intentions, reveals the hero’s true identity.

A clever example of this comes from *HOW TO LOSE A GUY IN 10 DAYS*. To score a lucrative advertising campaign, Ben Barry must convince a girl to fall in love with him within ten days.

His target? Magazine columnist Andie Anderson, who as it happens, is writing an article on annoying female habits which drive men away, “a dating how-to in reverse.”

Towards the end of Act Two, Ben takes Andie to a fancy work event. There, his boss asks Andie if she’s in love with Ben. From her flustered response, he concludes that she has indeed been pierced by Cupid’s arrow, and consequently, awards Ben the point-man position on the lucrative advertising campaign.

However, Ben’s moment of glory is short-lived. Eyeing the campaign for themselves, two female rivals (both named Judy) tell Ben’s friends that Ben cheated. They claim that Ben told Andie about the bet, and the columnist is merely playing along so Ben could win.

As the conniving ladies had anticipated, Ben’s two friends rush to Andie’s table and beg her to do right by Ben. “Warren [Ben’s boss] is going to come over here in a minute. And it would be so great if you could just, you know, act like you don’t know anything about the bet...If you could tell him that you, you really truly love Ben, and you weren’t just pretending, so he would win, that would be huge.”

The two boys meant well. But in trying to help out Ben, they unmasked him to Andie, who had been blissfully unaware of Ben’s pretense. The film could’ve just as easily had the two Judies reveal the truth to Andie. It was a sophisticated touch to have these rivals manipulate Ben’s friends into doing the dirty deed for them, infusing the inevitable unmasking scene with a little unpredictability.

HOW TO LOSE A GUY is also noteworthy in that *both* the hero and the heroine are engaged in pretense. Because both of them are deceiving each other, the movie is rife with cross-agendas—and the kind of organic conflict which is at the heart of any engaging story.

In *WORKING GIRL*, Tess’s boss, Katharine, discovers that Tess has been posing as her colleague, (when, in fact, Tess is Katharine’s secretary) after Tess accidentally leaves behind her appointment book in Katharine’s apartment.

Theoretically, Katharine’s discovery of Tess’s deception could’ve played out much differently. Throughout the script, Tess’s best friend, Cyn, has voiced misgivings about Tess’s ruse. One can easily imagine Cyn telling Katharine the truth in the misguided belief that by exposing Tess now, Cyn is saving the plucky secretary from more damage later.

Admittedly, using the appointment book to expose Tess in *WORKING GIRL* is a far less complicated method than engineering a confessional between Cyn and Katharine. And in general, screenwriters rarely use this option.

However, the idea that people can do harmful things out of love—rather than out of hate, jealousy, or fear—is a fascinating one. (If you need proof, just watch Dobby’s machinations in *HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS*.)

Using the hero’s friend to unmask him can also enrich Act Three with extra conflict, as the hero has to, in addition to pursuing his overall story goal, reconcile with the friend who betrayed him.

THE MARK

Even though a hero deceives many people with his pretense, one victim of the hero’s deception often stands out above the rest (typically a love interest). For the sake of simplicity, I’ll refer to this key individual as “the mark.”

In this situation, the mark discovers the hero’s ruse all on his (or her) lonesome. For example, in *HITCH*, gossip columnist Sara Melas lives and dies for the scoop. In pursuit of her next story, she learns that her boyfriend, Alex

Hitchens, is the secretive “date doctor” who orchestrated a relationship between a pampered socialite and his schlubby client.

Since Sara uncovers Hitch’s deception herself, she comes across as a strong, perceptive, and active character. All qualities actresses like to see in their roles!

Although it technically doesn’t occur at the movie’s trough, a brilliant example of this technique in action can be found in *DAVE*. In this sophisticated political comedy, the titular character bears an uncanny resemblance to the American president. When the leader of the free world suffers from a debilitating stroke, his chief of staff concocts a plan for Dave to masquerade as the commander-in-chief. While Dave fools the public—and the press—he doesn’t fool the First Lady.

Well, he fools her at first. Then Ellen wises up and baits a trap for him. “You know...it [a selfless political act] kind of reminded me of that thing you did a long time ago in the state legislature,” she says, her voice filled with innocence.

When Dave concurs, Dave inadvertently unmask himself. You see, as Ellen patiently explains to him, the real president never served a term in the state legislature.

Later, Ellen reveals that she knew Dave was an imposter when they visited a homeless shelter for children. Dave snuck a peek at her legs, and according to the First Lady, her husband stopped doing that a long time ago.

Even though Ellen suspected Dave was a fraud, she didn’t confront him immediately. This delay not only plays against expectations, creating a delightful reversal which shades previous scenes with extra meaning, but also tells the audience worlds about her character and her feelings towards Dave.

THE HERO

In this final option, the hero unmask himself of his own free will. Out of all the revelation methods, this is my favorite because it portrays the hero in a courageous, selfless light. By reaffirming that the hero is a good guy—despite his deception—it’s also a strong way to maintain the critical bond between hero and audience.

For example, in the teen comedy *NEVER BEEN KISSED*, Josie Gellar is an undercover reporter who, in pursuit of a career-making story, poses as a local high school student. With the help of her brother, she’s managed not only to keep the ruse going but also to inveigle her way into the popular girls’ clique.

But everything goes haywire on prom night, when the popular girls target Aldys, a nerdy friend of Josie’s. On the brink of revealing her true identity to Sam, the teacher she’s fallen in love with, Josie curtails her confession and saves Aldys from the humiliation of being doused in dog food.

Bested, the popular girls turn on Josie, proclaiming she’s “a loser who ruined everything.” Fed up of their drama, Josie voluntarily reveals her true identity to the assembled crowd—which includes Sam.

Josie could’ve ignored Aldys’s plight and, as she had planned, told Sam the truth privately—which would’ve been far less alienating than her very public confession. Because she didn’t, because she put Aldys’s needs above her own, audiences root all the harder for Josie as she tries to win Sam back in Act Three.

In *THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS*, Brian Conner is an undercover FBI agent trying to infiltrate a street racing crew, led by Dom Toretto, which is likely involved in a string of robberies. To complicate matters, Brian becomes romantically entangled with Dom’s sister, Mia.

At the end of Act Two, the crew is poised to stage a final theft, unaware that their truck driver targets are now heavily armed. In order to prevent Dom from dying in a bloodbath, Brian unmask himself to Mia, revealing his true identity as an undercover agent.

Hypothetically, this reveal could have transpired far differently. Instead of unmasking himself, Brian could’ve been unmasked by a rival—like Vince, who almost succeeded in revealing Brian’s true identity earlier on. By having Brian unmask himself, the movie highlighted his loyalty to Dom, enabling the film to successfully portray Brian’s conflicting allegiances while setting up his decision to let Dom go at the end.

Maintaining Dramatic Tension

When your hero is involved in a longstanding pretense, the audience is typically in a superior position to the majority of your screenplay characters. This situation infuses your script with a heady dose of dramatic irony.

Once the truth is revealed, and the hero is unmasked, audiences know exactly what's going to happen. Massively unpleasant consequences will ensue. *Even so, they anticipate this moment.*

Milk it for all it's worth.

The more you play around with this anticipation—specifically the threat of exposure—the more audiences will engage with your story.

If you're writing a hero unmasked type of script, this should be your #1 source of opportunities to fulfill genre requirements. You should exploit its possibilities to heighten tension or to set up comedy gags as much as you can.

We've briefly explored this already in *THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS*. Once audiences learn that Brian is an undercover agent, they'll be anticipating the moment when he's exposed as an imposter to Dom's street racing crew. The movie skillfully toys with this expectation. When Brian investigates a garage housing the same make and model of cars used in a string of robberies, Vince catches him in the act and threatens Brian with a fierce-looking gun.

"He moans like a cop," Vince says to Dom, who emerges, grim-faced, from the shadows. "Brian, this is one of those times you need to be very clear about what you say," Dom says, underscoring Brian's tenuous position. As Brian hastily justifies his actions, Vincent repeatedly affirms that Brian is a cop.

Viewing this scene, audiences would doubt that Brian would be exposed so early on—where, really, could the story go from there? At the same time, it seems equally impossible for Brian to extricate himself from the dicey situation.

These conflicting thoughts create the kind of tension audiences delight in. Oddly enough, in real life, they'd shun such tension, but at the movie theater, they're willing to pay for it.

The same principle applies to movies with more lighthearted tones. Think about the great comic gags in *MRS DOUBTFIRE*. In one memorable sequence, Daniel Hillard rapidly shifts between his true identity and his feminine alter ego in order to deceive his court liaison, Mrs Sellner.

The sequence begins with their simultaneous arrival upon Daniel's doorstep. All would be well, except he's clad in his full Doubtfire garb, and she's expecting a meeting with Daniel.

Rapidly shedding his Doubtfire accoutrements—granny wig, prosthetic face, and padded bodysuit—Daniel also manages to give Mrs Sellner a running commentary of his day (which is filled with verbal quips). Finally, he emerges from his bedroom, looking like regular old rumpled Daniel.

Disaster averted!

But then, in the course of making idle chit-chat with Mrs Sellner, Daniel brags about Mrs Doubtfire's ability to make a good cup of English tea. Naturally, Mrs Sellner would love to try some.

Poor Daniel has to rush back to his bedroom and transform himself into Mrs Doubtfire again. Unfortunately, in his haste, his prosthetic face falls out of the window and onto the street below.

Before he can secretly retrieve it, a creaky floorboard alerts Mrs Sellner to his presence. Half-Daniel, half-Doubtfire, he flees into the kitchen, scrambling to produce the promised cup of tea and to find a suitable substitute for his prosthetic face. At the last second he finds a solution—cake icing—which masks his identity (and ends up sweetening Mrs Sellner's tea).

The threat of exposure fuels the humor in this hilarious sequence, enabling the film to make good on its genre promises. But what happens when the hero is finally unmasked?

The threat of exposure...well...is no longer a threat.

The dramatic irony evaporates and the tension it produces seeps out of the story. *THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS* could supplant the dissipating tension with an exciting car chase. In most stories, that isn't going to be a viable option.

Television shows in which there's unresolved romantic tension between the leading characters face a similar problem. The boob tube solution? To delay consummation of the attraction for as long as possible: Luke and Lorelai (*GILMORE GIRLS*, 4 seasons); Bones and Booth (*BONES*, 6 seasons); Castle and Beckett (*CASTLE*, 4 seasons); Tony and Ziva (*NCIS*, not after eight seasons together, maybe not ever).

Like television writers who keep the hero and heroine apart for one hundred episodes or more, you may want to milk the dramatic tension produced by the threat of exposure for all its worth, and delay your hero's unmasking until the very end.

Instead of revealing your hero's identity at the trough of hell, you save the unmasking for the climax.

This strategy was used to great effect in *MRS DOUBTFIRE*. Because the unmasking sequence is discussed more in-depth in Part IV of this book, to see this strategy in action, we'll forsake Mrs Doubtfire for the lonely heroine of *WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING*. In the charming romantic comedy, Lucy pretends to be the fiancée of a guy in a coma so that she can spend time with members of his family, who enthusiastically welcome her into the Callaghan fold.

Lucy's deception isn't revealed until 7 minutes before the movie ends, when she confesses the truth in the middle of her wedding to Coma Guy (who has nicely recovered). This delay milked dramatic irony to the last drop—creating an exceptionally engaging experience for audiences.

If you're toying with this tactic, be aware that it does come with its own set of complications, namely that you need to devise a substitute for the unmasking which would've taken place at the end of Act Two.

In *WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING*, Lucy falls in love with Jack, Coma Guy's brother. Gathering her courage, she asks Jack point-blank if he can give her any reason not to marry his brother. He can't.

Jack's rejection motivates Lucy to continue with the ruse. When her boss inquires as to why Lucy is marrying Coma Guy and not Jack, she replies with tears in her eyes, "He [Jack] didn't want me."

Because audiences have invested in Lucy and Jack as a couple, this trough—although brief—has emotional impact. As such, it is an adequate substitute for the unmasking which could have taken place instead.

To be clear, delaying the hero's unmasking doesn't *automatically* increase dramatic tension. To be effective, the threat of exposure has to be the driving force behind the humor or suspense.

To see why, let's look at *MISS CONGENIALITY* (incidentally another Sandra Bullock blockbuster). In this comedy, the humor is of the "fish out of water" variety. Graceless and unfeminine Gracie Hart must thrive in a world which is completely alien to her. Her ensuing discomfort fuels the majority of the movie's comic gags.

Even though the unmasking of Sandra Bullock's character is deferred until the end of Act Three (and creates a hilarious gag in which the contestants fight Gracie for the pageant crown), unlike *WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING*, this delay does nothing to enhance dramatic tension.

The comedy gags in *DAVE* were fueled by both the threat of exposure and Dave's "fish out of water" experience. Consequently, its approach of maintaining dramatic tension is fairly unique. As you've already seen, the film doesn't delay Dave's unmasking to the First Lady until the climax. She discovers his deceit on her own, well before Act Two ends.

However, their alliance gives Dave the courage to fire Bob Alexander, the thoroughly corrupt chief of staff. Bob retaliates by telling the press that the president is involved in a financial scandal.

Although Dave is innocent of these charges, the real president is not—a state of affairs which creates a new threat to Dave in Act Three, while maintaining the threat of exposure to the public as a source of dramatic tension. Dave manages to extricate himself from his predicament so brilliantly, that his deception is never exposed to the American people.

This raises a critical point: with rare exception, in screenplays with a premise rooted in grand pretense, the hero must be exposed to someone who can jeopardize his well-being by *THE END*.

Otherwise, audiences will feel cheated because they've been anticipating what's going to happen when the hero finally reveals the truth. They want to witness that fallout, so don't deprive them of it!

DAVE gets away with keeping the American public in the dark, in large part, because Ellen discovers Dave's deceit. One can imagine an alternate version of the movie in which Dave gets away with his ruse scot-free. Contravening our sense of justice and fair play (and perhaps straining credibility too much), that version wouldn't have been as satisfying to watch.

Maintaining Likeability

When your hero deceives other characters for an extended period of time, his ruse can seem more callous than clever. As a result, his likeability stock can take a major tumble.

There are a few solutions to this. We just covered one of them: have the hero unmask himself. That goes a long way towards boosting your hero's image with the audience. As devourers of celebrity scandals can attest, the public is more forgiving towards wayward stars once the celebs confess their mistakes and take ownership of their wrong actions.

Even if the hero doesn't unmask himself, it's a smart choice to give him an opportunity to do so. If, as is often the case, circumstances prevent him from revealing the truth, he still looks like a decent guy.

In *WEDDING CRASHERS*, John was about to tell Claire the truth about his past right before her fiancé gloatingly drops the bombshell. Since John was interrupted before he could confess, audiences would feel sympathetic towards him, even if they looked askance at his deceit.

Note too, that prior to this scene, Jeremy, John's best friend, confesses their sins to a Catholic priest, which enhanced Jeremy's own likeability quotient.

Similarly, in *WORKING GIRL*, Tess is on the cusp of telling Jack the truth when he makes a confession of his own. Although the relationship has long since cooled on his end, technically, he's dating someone else: Katherine, Tess's boss and nemesis.

This revelation, which complicates matters even further, comes as a shock to both Tess and the audience. Unsettled by Jack's admission, Tess decides to stave off telling the truth a little while longer, and frankly, who could blame her?

In *MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING*, Jules attends the wedding of her best friend, Michael, in order to sabotage it. Spurred on by another friend, George, Jules resolves to confess to Michael that she has romantic feelings for him.

She hems and haws to such a degree, Michael gets impatient. "Whatever it is you have to say can't be that big a deal," he says, unaware he's undermining the legitimacy of the feelings she's about to give voice to.

Unsurprisingly, Jules doesn't follow through. Even though she doesn't come clean, her uncharacteristic vulnerability in the scene improves her likeability ratings, which could've been potentially damaged by her acts of sabotage.

Jules's close shave with the truth produces another benefit. When Michael misconstrues the little Jules has said to indicate that she has romantic feelings for George (who's actually gay), Jules clings to this misinterpretation like a life jacket.

Hence, she browbeats George into playing her fiancé, layering another pretense on top of Jules's original deception. George's begrudging compliance produces several comedy gags, which culminate in a memorable sing-along to "I Say a Little Prayer (For You)."

In this case, giving the heroine the opportunity to come clean yielded major dividends. Perhaps, it'll do the same for your screenplay!

Maintaining Credibility

To successfully execute a hero unmasked screenplay, you must overcome the credibility hurdles your hero's pretense causes.

How exactly does the hero perpetuate his ruse without the other characters clueing in?

If no one wises up, your characters may seem remarkably obtuse. This is especially problematic if the mark is your hero's love interest. If the mark appears dull-witted, then he (or she) isn't worthy of the hero's love. If the mark isn't a worthy object of affection, then there's no reason for audiences to invest in the hero and the mark's relationship in the first place.

The response of studio readers and movie-goers will be lackluster when the couple is inevitably torn apart and lukewarm when the couple gets back together.

To avoid this pernicious pitfall, try one (or more) of the three solutions below.

Credibility Smoother #1: Unleash the Beast of Suspicion

We've actually already touched upon this one: make the mark suspicious.

Even if they don't see through the hero's deceit, their suspicions add realism to even the most far-fetched of ruses. Plus, they can function as surrogates for the audience who may also be harboring their own share of doubts.

Jack's skepticism of Lucy's intentions in *WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING* made him look like less of a sucker (and created lots of comedic moments). Likewise, in *10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU*, because Kat keeps on wondering "what's in it" for Patrick, she doesn't look foolish for believing his lies.

Credibility Smoother #2: Set It Up Beforehand

If the hero requires a special set of skills to maintain his ruse, you can erase credibility hurdles simply by setting up his talent in advance.

From the first time we're introduced to Daniel Hillard (*MRS DOUBTFIRE*) and Michael Dorsey (*TOOTSIE*), we know they're top-notch impersonators. So, when they fool the world into believing they're women, we'll happily play along.

Note: we'll discuss setups more in depth in the "*Deus Ex Machina*" section of this chapter. If you're interested, there's also a wonderful analysis of how *SOME LIKE IT HOT* used setups and payoffs to overcome credibility issues in *Writing the Romantic Comedy* by Billy Mernit.

Credibility Smoother #3: Call in the Cavalry

Give the hero help—lots of it. If he has lots of allies and/or resources to aid him in his quest, the hero's continued success seems anything but far-fetched.

Help may come in many forms, whether it be a secret identity provided by the FBI (*THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS*, *MISS CONGENIALITY*), a meddling sister (*10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU*), meddling friends (*HOW TO LOSE A GUY IN 10 DAYS*), or a closet full of elegant clothes (*WORKING GIRL*).

Here's a neat trick: convert one of the hero's marks into his ally. The marks thus transform from opponents who threaten the hero with exposure into allies who abet the hero with his disguise.

We've already seen an example of this with the First Lady in *DAVE*. *WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING* also puts this technique to good use. Burdened by a guilty conscience, Lucy confesses all to Coma Guy. Unbeknownst to Lucy, her confession is overheard by a Callaghan family friend. Instead of exposing her, this friend encourages her to keep the ruse going.

Note that this scene accomplishes double duty—one of the keys to great screenwriting. Even though Coma Guy isn't conscious and can't process a word of Lucy's confession, she still earns the brownie points which come with it. Plus, the scene explains her motivations, getting audience even more on board with the deception.

If your story requires audiences to support actions which are morally questionable, this is a great movie to study. (If you need a grittier option, there's always *THE GODFATHER*.)

Trough Type #2: Capture

In this type of trough, the protagonist (as opposed to a supporting character) gets captured. Keep in mind this capture is not figurative, but literal.

The hero's physical movements are restricted, whether by handcuffs (*SHERLOCK HOLMES*), prison bars (*LIAR LIAR*), a bamboo cage (*HOUSE OF THE FLYING DAGGERS*), or a deathly grip (*THE HUNGER GAMES*).

While this trough can be used in comedies (in *HOME ALONE*, Kevin McCallister is temporarily caught by a bumbling burglar), it's most often used in thrillers, action movies, and tales of adventure, and in these genres, is frequently accompanied by torture.

Whether the hero is apprehended by an agent of the villain or by the villain himself, his capture should come as a surprise to audiences, a plot twist they never saw coming. Otherwise, your story will be predictable, and as such, will generate little enjoyment.

At the same time, savvy audience members, who've subconsciously absorbed story structure, may expect a major setback at this very moment.

So how do you foil their expectations?

The easiest way is to lull the audience into a false sense of security through the judicious use of contrast.

Immediately before the hero is caught, it should appear to audiences that he's on the verge of victory. As discussed in Part I, employing this technique also has the added benefit of crafting a trough which engages audience emotions to a greater degree.

For instance, In *BEVERLY HILLS COP*, Axel Foley suspects that Victor Maitland, a well-respected art dealer, really earns his wealth by smuggling drugs. However, these suspicions are routinely dismissed by local police. At the end of Act Two, Foley is proven right

Huzzah!

Audiences are so engrossed by Foley's vindication, that when Maitland and his underlings storm the warehouse, it comes as a complete surprise.

In some cases, getting captured is an unexpected turn of events to the audience—but not to the hero, who orchestrated it as part of his grandmaster strategy. We've already seen this in *SHERLOCK HOLMES*. In order to thwart an attack by the villain, the wily detective first has to discover where the attack will take place.

To glean this knowledge, Holmes arranges for his arrest, and is consequently brought into the private office of Lord Coward, a corrupt politician privy to the villain's plan.

Only after Holmes escapes does the audience learn that he engineered this encounter on purpose. It's a clever reversal which reinforces the intelligence of both the hero *and* the screenwriters.

Like Sherlock Holmes, Luke Skywalker intentionally brings about his own capture in *STAR WARS V: RETURN OF THE JEDI*. But unlike Holmes, Luke's surrender is not some sleight of hand or act of misdirection. It's exactly as it seems on the surface.

Luke knows that his father, Darth Vader, won't rest until he's handed Luke over to the evil emperor. Luke surrenders himself willingly to Vader because he has faith that, in the end, his father won't hurt him.

You might expect that only the villain (or his henchmen) capture the hero during the hero's trough of hell. But that's not always the case.

Before Luke surrendered himself to Darth Vader in *RETURN THE JEDI*, he and his friends were captured by Ewoks, creatures who are unaffiliated with Vader and the rest of Vader's evil cohorts.

That's not to say the Ewoks don't pose a threat to Luke and his band of resistance fighters. At first, the Ewoks plan to feast on them!

But these foes soon transform into friends, eventually providing critical assistance to the rebels during the climax. This is yet another example which illustrates the paradoxical nature of the trough of hell: if Luke and his friends hadn't been captured by the Ewoks, they wouldn't have come into contact with a vital source of aid, pivotal to their eventual victory.

True to form, *THE DARK KNIGHT* puts an unusual spin on the capture trough type. At the end of Act Two, the villain—not the hero—is apprehended.

Although he courts chaos, the Joker accomplishes his objectives through extremely well-organized plans. With the benefit of hindsight, Lieutenant Gordon realizes that the Joker *wanted* Gordon to lock him up in the MCU. That way, the Joker is in the perfect position to break Lau (a Chinese accountant working for the mob) out of jail.

The Escape Hatch

In the hero unmasking type of trough, it's critical to determine who unmasks your hero. Likewise, with the capture trough type, it's critical to figure out how your hero is going to break free.

You have many options at your disposal. The key is to choose an "escape hatch" which is unique to your hero and to your story world. This is one key way you can prove your screenwriting mettle and distinguish your script from all the other screenplays in which the hero gets caught at the end of Act Two.

Below are some examples and ideas to inspire you:

OBJECTS OF CONVENIENCE

Your hero's means of escape can be contained within an object he carries on his person. In *SHERLOCK HOLMES*, Holmes unlocks his handcuffs via a key given to him by Inspector Lestrade.

Alternately, the hero's means of escape can be found in an object within easy grasp. For example, in *HOME ALONE*, Kevin escapes from Marvin's grip by tossing a hairy tarantula onto the burglar's face.

In *AIR FORCE ONE*, President Marshall cuts through the duct tape binding his wrists with a shard of broken glass—collateral damage conveniently produced by his fisticuffs with the villain and the villain's underlings.

WITHIN THE HERO

Your hero can also escape capture by relying upon his internal strength and skill set. In *TAKEN*, former CIA agent Bryan Mills is handcuffed to an exposed overhead pipe. Just as the villain's goons are about to shoot him, he wrenches the pipe free from its moorings.

Still handcuffed, he disarms the goons in a dazzling display of martial arts. Finally, he extricates the handcuff key from one of the hit men (now unconscious), unlocks the cuffs, and regains full mobility.

This method of escape is a fantastic way to emphasize that your hero is an active protagonist. However, if not executed with finesse, it can also turn your hero into an action movie caricature.

At the beginning of *TAKEN*, Bryan Mills announces to the villains (and correspondingly to the audience) that he is in possession of "a very particular set of skills which he has acquired over a long career." Because he's demonstrated mastery of these skills throughout Act Two, his escape from captivity comes across as impressive rather than preposterous.

ALLIES TO THE RESCUE

In the most common method, the hero will escape captivity through the help of a friend. If you choose your hero's rescuer with care and consideration, you'll be able to accomplish more than just the liberation of your hero.

For instance, as aforementioned, in *BEVERLY HILLS COP*, at the end of Act Two, Axel Foley is apprehended by Victor Maitland's goons. Before they can kill him, local cop Billy Rosewood comes to Foley's rescue. It's not exactly original for a police officer to be rescued by backup, but the way it was done was unique (at least back in 1984).

Unlike Foley, Rosewood is neither cocky, nor self-assured, nor used to the world of violent crime. As he monitors the warehouse where Foley's being held, Rosewood sweats profusely. He bites his nails. He uses expressions like "oh boy."

The juxtaposition of Rosewood's nervousness with Foley's brashness infuses the rescue mission with an off-kilter—and thoroughly enjoyable—vibe, adding to the movie's comedy quotient, and thereby fulfilling genre expectations.

For a more serious example, let's examine *THE HUNGER GAMES*. In the dystopian world of the story, heroine Katniss Everdeen must compete against stronger, better-trained teen competitors—known as tributes—in a televised fight till the

death.

One hundred and fourteen minutes into the movie, Katniss is assaulted by a competitor from District 2. Clove hurls knives at Katniss, wrestles her to the ground, and is about to slit her throat when Clove is suddenly wrenched away from Katniss's body.

Thresh, a competitor from District 11, kills Clove, effectively saving Katniss's life. Per the rules of the Games, Thresh should kill Katniss too. But he doesn't. His justification is summed up in two words: "for Rue."

Earlier in the film, Katniss bonds with Rue, the other tribute from Thresh's district. Even though food is in scarce supply, Katniss shares what she has with the young girl. Together, they formulate a strategy to destroy their competitors' resources.

However, Rue doesn't survive their joint mission. After Rue dies in Katniss's arms, Katniss tries to honor the young girl's spirit by covering her body with flowers. To show his gratitude for Katniss's kindness, Thresh lets Katniss go—this one time, at least.

This is a great illustration of using the same story events to accomplish multiple storytelling objectives. Helping Rue paves the way for Thresh to transform from Katniss's foe into temporary friend. But it does more than create an escape hatch for the heroine. Helping Rue also enables Katniss to be portrayed in a more complex light.

Although audiences are sympathetic to Katniss's plight, she has the tendency to react to kindness with hostility and mistrust, behavior which makes her fascinating but also potentially alienating. Helping Rue bolsters Katniss's likeability, overcoming any negative impression Katniss's hostility may have created, which allows audiences to invest in her character and well-being without reserve. This investment will, in turn, heighten their emotional engagement with the story.

THELMA AND LOUISE has perhaps one of the most sophisticated rescue attempts (or escape hatches) in cinema. As previously mentioned, en route to Mexico, the two women are pulled over by a cop. After he directs Louise into his vehicle, he calls headquarters to communicate his report.

Before he can make contact, Thelma saddles up to the driver's window and, very apologetically, points a gun at his head. She then instructs Louise to use the officer's gun to shoot the radio. Louise complies and shoots the car radio, before realizing Thelma intended for her to shoot the dispatch radio.

This slip-up underscores why Thelma's rescue mission is so memorable. At the movie's outset, no-nonsense Louise is in control, reacting to their predicament with cool-headed pragmatism. Thelma, on the other hand, behaves more like a spoiled child. At the beginning of the movie, Thelma would never have entertained the idea of holding a cop at gunpoint. In fact, she's the one who usually needs rescuing.

But Thelma's journey with Louise has transformed her. Thelma's no longer a passive housewife, no longer content to sit still and look pretty, but a self-assured outlaw who takes action. In her own words, "Something's, like, crossed over in me, and I can't go back. I mean, I just couldn't live."

Louise's rescue, then, is borne out of the fundamental alteration of Thelma's character. In lesser hands, such a radical shift in personality would not be believable, but Callie Khouri pulls off this feat with consummate skill.

As a side note on the subjectivity of all of this, in Syd Field's seminal screenwriting guide *Screenplay*, he describes a completely different moment to signify the end of Act Two. To him, it's not when the cop pulls over Thelma and Louise, but when Louise stops the car to admire Utah's Monument Valley "underneath a blanket of stars."

Whether you agree with this book or his, Thelma's rescue mission is a wonderful example of using a character's actions to illustrate her character arc.

Trough Type #3: Death

This trough type enables you to do something bold. Something unthinkable. While savvy audiences may anticipate your hero's capture at the end of Act Two, they would never anticipate his death.

How could they expect such a thing?

Without a hero, there's no one to helm the action in Act Three. Equally discomfiting, audiences have to experience the story from the point of view of a new character whom they might not be as comfortable identifying with.

To borrow the catchphrase of *THE PRINCESS BRIDE*'s Vizzini, this trough type is simply "inconceivable!"

Although this trough certainly grabs audiences' attention and engages their emotions, it's not without its drawbacks. You must engineer your hero's death in such a way that it appears neither manipulative nor random—no stress-free feat

Assuming that you've managed to successfully kill off your hero, you're now faced with a heavier burden: *you must bring your hero back to life.*

The Resurrection Device

Your hero, unlike Christ, cannot rely upon the power of God to restore his life. His means of resurrection must come from less hallowed sources.

The easiest method is to employ misdirection. In other words, your hero doesn't die; *it just appears that way.*

The trick, then, is getting audiences to believe this illusion. This is actually fairly easy. Audiences experience a film primarily from the viewpoint of the hero. Once the hero appears to have died, they will be scrambling to find a new character from whose point of view they can experience the story.

If this new character believes that the hero is dead, then audiences will accept this assumption—as incorrect as it is—as truth.

For instance, in *LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS*, it appears that one of the heroes, Aragorn, has perished while battling Orcs and wargs. In Part I, we covered the whys and wherefores of his death. Now, it's time to examine the means. In an attempt to kill an Orc, Aragorn's gear gets entangled with a warg's fur. When the warg plummets down a cliff, Aragorn falls with him.

The Orc with whom Aragorn was fighting tells Aragorn's comrades—Legolas, Gimli, and King Theoden—that Aragorn is dead. "He took a little tumble off a cliff," the Orc says, before taking his last breath.

Reflecting the feelings of the audience, Legolas denies this pronouncement. But then Legolas discovers a pendant clutched in the hands of the dead Orc, a pendant Aragorn would never voluntarily remove.

Legolas, Gimli, and Theoden then make their way to the edge of the cliff and peer at the rocky surface below. "Get the wounded on horses. Leave the dead," Theoden says with calm resignation, before turning away from the cliff side, an action which implies that Aragorn belongs to the latter, rather than to the former, category.

The final nail is tacked to Aragorn's coffin, so to speak, when another character, Eowyn, reacts to news of Aragorn's fall with visible grief. Because Theoden, Legolas, Gimli, and Eowyn treat Aragorn as a definitive casualty, the audience has no choice but to do the same.

The writers will use misdirection again in the third film of the trilogy, *THE RETURN OF THE KING*. This time, it's not Aragorn who appears to have died, but the dominant protagonist of the ensemble, the hobbit Frodo.

Having been tricked into venturing into the lair of a giant spider, Frodo valiantly tries to fight her off. He succeeds, and is about to forge ahead, when she makes a surprise attack, piercing him with her poisoned stinger. After he faints, the spider swaddles him in a sticky cocoon.

Eventually, Frodo's best friend, Sam, defeats the spider. Sam rushes to Frodo's side and scrapes away the webbing covering Frodo's face, which has now taken on a greenish tint.

"Don't leave me here alone," Sam implores Frodo. "Don't go where I can't follow. Wake up!" As tears stream down his face, Sam finally resigns himself to the truth. "Not asleep. Dead."

Frodo's immobility, green hue, and unblinking eyes all signal to the audience that Frodo has breathed his last. But it's really Sam's reaction which stamps out any lingering hope that, appearances to the contrary, Frodo is alive.

Once Frodo loses consciousness, Sam becomes the point of view character through whom audiences experience this story thread. Because Sam believes that the spider has killed Frodo, audiences accept his assumption as true.

Lest you conclude this kind of misdirection can only be applied to movies of the fantasy genre, here's another example. It's from the action comedy *KNIGHT AND DAY*. After June turns in Roy to the CIA, agents storm Roy's hotel room, initiating an adrenaline-pumping chase sequence atop the rooftops of Salzburg. On the brink of being captured, Roy falls into the river several feet below.

It seems impossible that one of the dual protagonists in this film has just died, and yet, there's no evidence to say otherwise. Appearing to regret her decision, June asks a CIA director if they found Roy. The director's choice of words is telling: "We'll find the body."

Since the director treats Roy as a corpse, June, having no reason to believe differently, must do the same. Having no other POV character but June to latch onto, audiences, likewise, will accept Roy's death at face value.

This acceptance is critical. Audiences must fully believe—even if just for a second—that your hero has died. If there's a shadow of doubt, their skepticism will temper their emotional response, and the death of your hero won't elicit the degree of emotion you intended for them to experience.

But once you've brought audiences to that emotional nadir, you can rally their hopes and resurrect your hero with alacrity. In *THE TWO TOWERS*, *RETURN OF THE KING*, and *KNIGHT AND DAY*, audiences, as well as other story characters, discover fairly quickly that Aragorn, Frodo, and Roy, respectively, are very much alive.

In other movies, the hero's death is not conveyed through the illusion of misdirection. The hero really does perish. If this is the case in your screenplay, you must bring your hero back to life through a credible method which honors the rules of your story world, and which doesn't seem like a cheat.

This could be a priceless ancient text (*THE MUMMY RETURNS*), true love's kiss (*ENCHANTED*, *SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN*), a defibrillator (*CASINO ROYALE*), or a special serum (*SHERLOCK HOLMES 2: GAME OF SHADOWS*). In each example, the employed resurrection device is perfectly in harmony with the particular world of each movie.

It's important to note that many screenplays don't bring the hero to the brink of death at the trough of hell—but at the script's climax. This can be an effective way to add extra emotional "oomph" to the tail end of your story. After all, there is no greater way to elicit emotion than through the gravitas of death.

Because you've reached the end of your tale, and there are no more story acts to follow, it's not critical to bring your hero back to life. Having (hopefully) achieved his goal, he can then pass into the netherworld.

If you're not a fan of unmitigated happy endings, this bittersweet finale may be just the ticket to satisfy audiences as well as your own artistic sensibility. (It also may impress competition judges who seem to prefer tragic endings over happy ones.)

However, if you want to keep the option of a sequel on the table (or if happy endings aren't anathema to you), then you'd also need to make use of a resurrection device here too, whether it be the tears of a phoenix (*HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS*), a bulletproof vest (*BACK TO THE FUTURE*), or even just a bit of misdirection (*THE BOURNE ULTIMATUM*, *THE DARK KNIGHT RISES*).

And in some rare cases, (*THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*, *X2: X-MEN UNITED*, *PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN 2: DEAD MAN'S CHEST*), audiences will have to wait all the way until the next film to witness the hero's resurrection. (This last circumstance probably isn't applicable to you now, but in a few years, when you're the hottest scribe in Hollywood, you might want to make use of it!)

There's one special issue which we haven't really addressed yet: ensemble casts. If you're telling a story with multiple heroes, you can easily kill off one of them at the trough of hell without worrying about a resurrection device.

The remaining members of the ensemble can helm the activity of Act Three as well as provide points of view through which audiences can experience the story.

Keep in mind though that the emotional effect of your trough is going to be a function of how much audiences have

invested in your hero. Other factors like likeability aside, this investment is usually proportionate to screentime, which will be divvied up between each member of the ensemble.

The less time your hero has on-screen, the more you dilute audience investment. To put it another way, if you plan to kill off a member of an ensemble, make sure this character has sufficient screentime in the story to elicit the audience reaction you're aiming for.

SIDEBAR: Deus Ex Machina

Back in ancient times, playwrights sometimes got lazy. Instead of having the hero of their drama escape through his own actions, a god would magically appear via a crane or trapdoor and present the hero with a solution to his problems.

Everything would be resolved all neat and tidy. Hence the name *deus ex machina*, which roughly translates to “a god from the machine.” It’s basically the ancient Greek version of a “get out of jail free” card.

As in love with their pantheon of deities as they were, audiences may’ve eaten up this type of ending back then. (I have no idea.) But modern audiences sure as heck hate them now. They can’t stand that kind of contrivance. They will reject any sort of solution which magically appears out of nowhere, whether it be of divine nature or not.

The trick, then, is to engineer a solution which magically appears *from somewhere*.

In other words, it’s part of the fabric of your story from the get-go. When your hero extricates himself from captivity or death with this solution, his escape hatch or resurrection device won’t seem random or coincidental because *you’ve established it beforehand*.

In screenwriting parlance, this is known as setup, while your hero’s miraculous escape/recovery would be considered the payoff. Setups and payoffs can be used in a variety of ways, not just to save your hero, (as you may recall they can be used as a credibility smoother in hero unmasked tales), but that’s what we’re focusing on here.

Understanding the concept of setup and payoff is easy; executing it, on the other hand, is less so. If you plant your setup too close to its payoff, you’ll call undue attention to it and completely ruin the effect.

As a general rule, the more time which elapses between the setup and the payoff, the less likely audiences will recognize the setup...well...as a setup. That’s why so many setups are embedded into screenplays all the way back in Act One.

Some screenwriters are concerned by such an extensive time elapse. They fear that by the time audiences witness the payoff, they will have forgotten the setup. To alleviate that concern, these writers will sprinkle references to the setup throughout their script.

Usually, this is not necessary, and only ends up drawing attention to the very thing they wish to mask. I encourage you to give audiences a little more credit.

They’re an extremely savvy bunch. After years of consuming the best (and, let’s be honest, the worst) Hollywood has to offer, their “setup detectors” are well-tuned and finely honed. Therefore, it’s not enough to use time elapse to camouflage your setup. It’s also a good idea to embed the setup into your story in such a way that audiences register its presence without consciously recognizing it as such.

The best approach can be summed up by Ron Weasley’s encounter with a three-headed dog in HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCEROR’S STONE. When his friend, Hermione, asks him if he noticed what the dog was standing on, he replies indignantly, “I wasn’t looking at its feet! I was a bit preoccupied with its heads!”

To put it another way, you should introduce your setup in such a way that audience attention is drawn to something else in the scene (the three-headed dog) other than the setup (the trapdoor at the dog’s feet). Alternately, you can fool the audience into thinking that your setup is intended for one purpose, when in fact, it’ll be used for quite a different purpose at the point of payoff.

Examples of Setups and Payoffs

To understand how skilled writers set up escape hatches and resurrection devices beforehand, study the examples below.

As you continue your screenwriting studies, you might consider keeping a journal of setups and payoffs which have particularly impressed you. When it comes time for you to rescue your hero from a perilous situation, this collection will hopefully steer you in the right direction.

Example #1: IRON MAN

Trough of Hell Predicament: The villain plucks the miniature arc reactor keeping Tony Stark alive from Tony's chest.

Resurrection Device: Using his remaining strength (and with minor assistance from a robot), Tony replaces the stolen arc reactor with an older model in his office. [100:06]

Setup: Tony instructed his assistant, Pepper Potts, to throw out the older arc reactor. But the sentimental Pepper kept it and turned into a memento, "proof that Tony Stark has a heart." [65:15]

Time Elapse: 35 minutes

Audience Focus: The subtext of the gift. Will Pepper and Tony ever act on their obvious attraction to each other?

Example #2: HOME ALONE

Trough of Hell Predicament: Eight-year-old Kevin McCallister is caught in the grip of a bumbling burglar.

Escape Hatch: A pet tarantula belonging to Kevin's older brother, Buzz. [85:40]

Setup: Usually forbidden entry into Buzz's domain, Kevin freely explores his brother's room. In the process, he breaks Buzz's shelves—as well as the glass cage containing Buzz's spider. [37:16]

Time Elapse: 48 minutes

Audience Focus: How does Kevin plan to use Buzz's life savings?

Note: The tarantula does make appearances throughout the movie before being used as an escape hatch.

Do you think those appearances were necessary? Why or why not?

Example #3: HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS

Trough of Hell Predicament: Deep in the Forbidden Forest, Harry Potter and Ron Weasley are about to be attacked by a horde of spiders whose ravenous appetites match their supernatural size.

Escape Hatch: An enchanted car belonging to Ron's dad, Mr Weasley, appears out of nowhere and whisks them away. [107:58]

Setup: When denied their traditional form of transportation to school, Harry and Ron borrow Mr Weasley's car in order to arrive on time for their second year at Hogwarts. After unceremoniously ejecting the boys (and their baggage) onto the grounds, the seemingly sentient car drives off on its own into the darkness. [28:00]

Time Elapse: 80 minutes

Audience Focus: Why couldn't Harry and Ron get to Hogwarts the normal way? Who or what prevented them? Also, how will Ron's family react to the news of his joyride?

Example #4: HORRIBLE BOSSES

Trough of Hell Predicament: After concocting a scheme to murder their respective bosses (but not actually executing it), Nick, Kurt, and Dale are taken to police headquarters and are questioned about the recent death of Kurt's boss.

Escape Hatch: Using information gleaned from watching hundreds of LAW AND ORDER episodes with his fiancée, Dale invokes the group's Fourth Amendment rights, and the police have no choice but to let them go. [71:15]

Dale's knowledge of the United States Constitution would have seemed preposterous, if not for the...

Setup: When the guys hatch their murderous plot, Dale claims he's well-versed in the ways "the bad guys mess up" because of all the LAW AND ORDER episodes he's watched. Finally, he concludes they have to hire a professional. [27:53]

Time Elapse: 43 minutes

Audience Focus: Are the guys really going to hire a hit man? Just how badly will their plan go awry?

Example #5: THELMA AND LOUISE

Trough of Hell Predicament: Thelma and Louise have been pulled over by a cop, who escorts Louise to his vehicle.

Escape Hatch: Thelma threatens the officer with a gun. With Louise's help, she locks him in the trunk of his cruiser. [100:52]

Starting out as a passive, reactive character, Thelma's behavior would've seemed preposterous if not for the...

Setup: Desperate for money to fund their escape to Mexico, Thelma holds up a supermarket (using the technique taught to her by a young con man who stole Thelma and Louise's funds in the first place). [74:04]

Time Elapse: 27 minutes

Audience Focus: Thelma's 180 degree transformation

It's important to understand that not every escape hatch or resurrection device needs to be set up as demonstrated in the above examples. Imagine if, in SHERLOCK HOLMES, audiences had witnessed Inspector Lestrade handing Holmes the handcuff key before Holmes was unceremoniously ushered into Coward's office.

Holmes's ensuing encounter with Coward would've lost all of its tension and completely ruined this part of the movie. In this case, using setup would've detracted from audience enjoyment rather than enhancing it.

Sometimes, you don't need to employ setup because the nature of the hero's rescue or resurrection is part and parcel of the story. For example, in GROUNDHOG DAY, Phil's ability to resurrect himself is built right into the movie's premise. In X2: X-MEN UNITED, no one questions Wolverine's ability to recover from a bullet to his forehead because his ability to heal himself is one of his defining character traits.

In CASINO ROYALE, things get a little more complicated. Having imbibed a poisoned martini, James Bond is on the brink of death. With some quick thinking, he makes it to his sweet Aston Martin.

With instructions from MI6, he manages to attach a defibrillator to his chest. But at the critical moment, it becomes disconnected from his body. Suddenly, Vesper Lynd rushes to the car, connects the defibrillator's leads, and saves Bond's life.

Now, the defibrillator would've seemed contrived if it hadn't made an appearance 30 minutes prior, when Bond first became acquainted with his fancy Montenegro wheels, thoughtfully provided by MI6. It's Vesper's sudden entrance which has the potential to trigger credibility monitors.

However, since she vowed to keep an eye on the millions fronted by the British Treasury so Bond can participate in a high-stakes poker game, it's not surprising that she also kept an eye on him.

Some stories don't need to make use of setup because the credibility of the hero's rescue resides in the knowledge audiences bring with them to the theater. For instance, in RETURN OF THE JEDI, Luke Skywalker and his friends are captured by the Ewoks, native inhabitants of Endor's forest moon. The Ewoks plan to turn their captives—save one—for supper.

Instead of melting the golden robot C3PO, the Ewoks worship him as a god. Relying on his mastery of the Force—the supernatural equivalent of Bryan Mills's special set of skills—Luke levitates C3PO. As Luke anticipated, the Ewoks become so afraid of C3PO's magical powers, that they finally release their captives.

Luke's ability to manipulate the Force is well-established by this point in the trilogy. *However, the Ewoks' worship of C3PO is not.*

This is the first encounter between audiences and the native inhabitants of Endor's moon. There's nothing in this film (or in the previous two) to indicate that the Ewoks' response is in keeping with their nature and not some contrived coincidence.

Audiences accept the Ewoks' reaction, without questioning its credibility, because of its parallels within the real world. Throughout history, ancient cultures have worshipped inanimate objects as deities. Even if they weren't directly conscious of this knowledge, audiences would be aware of its truth at the subconscious level.

Similarly, in *SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN*, having consumed a poisoned apple presented to her by the evil queen, Snow White dies. The young princess comes back to life after the Huntsman kisses her. As I recall, there's not a single instance in the movie in which the characters allude to the restorative powers of true love's kiss.

Its ability to cheat death would seem annoyingly convenient if audiences hadn't already been familiar with the fairy tale on which the film was based and, in which, true love conquers all. Their familiarity would silence their credibility monitors. Without it, audiences would've cried foul.

Imagine if, without any prior explanation, true love's kiss was used as a resurrection device in another story arena—like, for instance, *THE MUMMY RETURNS*. You'd never convince audiences that Legionnaire Rick O'Connell resurrected his wife with a kiss unless you had established its restorative powers beforehand.

In contrast, in the case of *THE MATRIX*, audiences *were* accepting of this. Though they weren't familiar with that story world (the way they were with the fairy tale of Snow White), in that "mind conquers all" universe, the ability of Trinity's kiss to revive Neo didn't trigger any credibility monitors, even though its potency was never explained in the film.

In the majority of cases, however, you will probably need to set up your escape hatches and resurrection devices in advance in order to avoid triggering audiences' credibility monitors. Once those monitors start to beep, audiences transform from rapt consumers into savage skeptics.

They will disengage from your story and start to question the probability and plausibility of everything they've seen. What's supposed to be an immersive experience suddenly becomes an intellectual exercise.

Although they don't leave their brains at the door when they enter the theater, audiences don't watch movies to think. They watch movies *to feel*.

Lukewarm emotion won't suffice either. They want to experience an intensity which they either never encounter or typically shun in real life. If their emotions become diluted with skepticism, their enjoyment will consequently diminish—as will the power of your story.

So keep those monitors silent, alright?

Trough Type #4: Banishment

In this kind of trough, the hero is denied access to special resources, a specific location, or another person (often an entire social group). It can be viewed as a "softer" version of trough types #2 and #3.

Even though the hero's movements are restricted, he retains a great deal of mobility. In this sense, this trough is less harsh than captivity. When a hero is banished, he's typically unable to communicate with the people he loves, resulting in a living death. All the same, he *is* still alive, which makes this trough less harsh than actually dying.

It's an ideal trough to explore:

- if your genre, tone, or intended MPAA rating precludes the use of violence
- if you can't think of a clever escape hatch or resurrection device, or
- if you need your hero to encounter a resource or ally in an "out of the way" location

The most famous example of banishment is perhaps from *ROMEO AND JULIET*. After killing Tybalt to avenge Mercutio, Romeo Montague is banished from the city of Verona, and hence, from the presence of his lady love Juliet Capulet. Indeed, this trough type lends itself to stories which take place in far-off time periods, past or future.

Take *PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL*, a swashbuckling ode to the untamed high-seas. During the film's trough of hell, Captain Barbossa banishes Captain Jack Sparrow, and a young maiden, Elizabeth Swann, to a remote island, where, as it happens, Captain Sparrow had been exiled before. In the sci-fi actioner *STAR TREK* (2009), which takes place on stardate 2258, Kirk is banished to the icy planet Delta Vega upon the orders of Spock, now in command of the *Starship Enterprise*.

Both of these examples demonstrate how the trough of hell is often a paradoxical plot point, which brings the hero closer to his goal, even though, on the surface, he seems the furthest from it. In *PIRATES*, Sparrow and Elizabeth are stranded on an island where smugglers secreted a large contraband of rum. Elizabeth uses the rum to fuel a massive fire, whose thousand-foot high smoke signal alerts the Royal Navy to her whereabouts. By exiling Elizabeth to a deserted island, Captain Barbossa paradoxically brought her closer to rescue.

There's another—even bigger—silver lining at work. Since the *Interceptor* was wrecked during the midpoint ship-to-ship battle, Elizabeth and Sparrow direly need another well-equipped vessel in order to rescue Will Turner (another hero and Elizabeth's love interest).

In fact, Sparrow himself makes humorous reference to this need, saying to Elizabeth, “The *Black Pearl* is gone. Unless you have a rudder and sails hidden away in that bodice,”—he smirks—“unlikely, young Mr Turner will be dead long before you can reach him.”

The Royal Navy provides the perfect seafaring replacement in the form of the *Dauntless*—an asset Elizabeth wouldn't have come into contact with unless she had been banished in the first place. (Well, if you want to get technical, I suppose you could argue that the Royal Navy could have caught up with the *Black Pearl* and negotiated for Elizabeth's release, but that option doesn't have quite the same appeal, does it?)

In *STAR TREK*, upon being exiled to Delta Vega, Kirk is pursued by two extra-terrestrial creatures, a situation which compels him to take refuge in a cave, where, as it happens, a future version of Spock dwells. Together, Kirk and Future Spock trek to a nearby Starfleet outpost, where they make the acquaintance of Montgomery “Scotty” Scott.

Using insight from Future Spock and an invention from Scotty, Kirk is able to beam himself back aboard the *Starship Enterprise* and claim his place as its captain.

It's all rather convenient, isn't it?

Contemporary Spock just happens to banish Kirk to Delta Vega. Delta Vega just so happens to be home not only to Future Spock but also to Montgomery Scott, both of whom indirectly assist Kirk's ascent to captain of the *Enterprise*.

It's so convenient, [some bloggers](#) have dubbed Kirk's refuge cave as the “cave of coincidence.” When questioned about it by MTV, screenwriters Roberto Orci & Alex Kurtzman (who also produced the summer blockbuster) [provided this explanation](#):

“Why was Spock put on that planet by Nero? Because of its proximity to Vulcan. And where was the *Enterprise* leaving when they decided to kick Kirk off the ship? [Author's note: the answer is Vulcan.] Then it's not a coincidence, is it? Their proximity to that moon is very much by the plot. One of the things we're playing to is the theme of destiny...the idea that it wasn't actually random chance. It seems like random chance if you run into Spock in that cave, but it wasn't. And in some way, the time stream is trying to mend itself...these characters are essentially destined to find each other in one way or another—and that fate is literally bringing them together.”

Orci adds, “If you read about quantum mechanics, you would have a further understanding of how there's a mathematical basis for destiny.”

Even though their explanation makes sense (except maybe for the quantum mechanics bit), Kirk's extraction strategy registered as a major contrivance, or *deus ex machina*, with some members of the public. (Not enough to hurt the film's box office returns or preclude the creation of a sequel, mind you.)

Even so, you're better off following the model in *THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL*, which clearly established Jack's prior relationship to the deserted island beforehand. Gibbs, Sparrow's first mate, is the one who explains the tale behind Jack's initial marooning to Will Turner.

According to Gibbs, Jack escaped by roping himself to the backs of giant sea turtles which Jack had lashed together to

make a raft. Jack chimes in, claiming he used human hair—from his back—for rope.

This exchange accomplishes several storytelling objectives. Its humor fulfills genre expectations, its improbability amplifies Jack's mythic status, its occurrence explains the captain's semi-drunk mannerisms, and its inclusion into the script removes the taint of coincidence from his and Elizabeth's banishment.

These two examples have focused on where (Delta Vega, a deserted island) the hero gets banished *to*. But to craft this kind of trough of hell, you can also focus on where the hero gets expelled *from*.

Approaching banishment from this angle is especially helpful when writing screenplays set in contemporary times, where you don't have the option of exiling your hero to a distant planet and rarely, if ever, have the ability to exile him to an uninhabited island.

In these kinds of modern-day stories, the emphasis is less on getting banished to a remote location and more on getting expelled from a position of prominence.

Typically, the hero is exiled from his place of employment, losing access to both his colleagues and their resources. In the worst case scenario, he might be fired. But you don't have to go to such extremes. Demotion is an equally viable option.

For instance, in *MISS CONGENIALITY*, Gracie Hart doesn't get fired from the FBI. But during her trough of hell, she must turn in her badge and her gun, and remain at the beauty pageant as a private citizen. In effect, she's temporarily ousted from the organization.

In the teen comedy *BRING IT ON*, Torrance Shipman isn't employed. As such, she doesn't lose her professional title. She loses the teenage equivalent: captainship of her cheerleading squad.

For a few seconds, she's ousted from the position, which she values as much as Gracie Hart values her FBI badge. Torrance's demotion, however, is brief. She quickly regains her position atop the cheerleading pyramid and briskly charts a new course of action for her unfortunate squad.

In some cases, nobody banishes the hero. Devastated by a major setback, he banishes himself. Often, his self-imposed exile removes him from a world to which he's adapted, and which he's on the verge of conquering.

In *LEGALLY BLONDE*, no one expels Elle Woods from Harvard Law, but she decides to withdraw herself from the institution after her professor crassly propositions her. In *TOP GUN*, no one forces Maverick to leave the Navy's Fighter Weapons School, but that's exactly what he plans to do after losing his wingman.

Banishment can be a great "topper" to your trough of hell, especially in comedies. As defined by Bill Mernit in *Writing the Romantic Comedy*, a topper is "a twist added to a gag's payoff to earn an additional laugh."

For our purposes, this twist would be an additional sting which caps your hero's trough. For example, after enduring hell, your hero may seek solace at his favorite restaurant—only to be summarily ejected from the premises.

But banishment can be put to more complex purpose than as a topper, particularly with regards to plotting. When deployed skillfully, this trough type builds obstacles into the fabric of your story, making it even more impossible for your hero to accomplish his overall goal, and correspondingly, making his attempts to achieve it all the more entertaining to watch.

Take Gracie Hart. To maintain access to all the stage areas of the beauty pageant, Gracie has to remain a viable competitor. Since she's been temporarily banished from the FBI, she can no longer avail herself of their resources.

Consultant Victor Melling will no longer be paid to beautify her; the pageant will no longer be rigged in her favor. Gracie must stay on the stage by virtue of her own merit.

In a touching display of female solidarity, the other contestants in the pageant help Gracie with her make-up and hair. One problem's solved. But there remains another: the talent component of the competition. These desperate times call for desperate measures. As a last resort, in a delightful set piece, Gracie demonstrates her self-defense skills to the pageant judges.

This scene is a direct outgrowth of her temporary banishment from the FBI. If she hadn't lost access to their resources (desperate times), she wouldn't have been driven to be quite so creative (desperate measures), and audiences would've missed out on one of the movie's most memorable moments.

In STAR TREK, before Kirk can even contemplate a climactic showdown with the villain, he must (a) find a way to leave Delta Vega and (b) take over the *Starship Enterprise*. To achieve (a), he enlists the aid of Montgomery Scott and Scotty's theory of trans-warp beaming. Kirk safely beams aboard the *Enterprise*, but Scotty unfortunately gets stuck in a giant water pipe, producing a set piece filled with both humor and action.

To achieve (b), following advice from Future Spock, Kirk deliberately baits Contemporary Spock in a tense and riveting confrontation. As Future Spock anticipated, Contemporary Spock yields his captaincy. As the senior-most officer aboard the starship, Kirk assumes his rightful position at its helm. Only now does he pursue the villain. (Incidentally, as part of his battle strategy, he must beam himself aboard the enemy starship, a feat he can only accomplish with Scotty's expertise.)

As a hypothetical situation, let's imagine that Kirk was never exiled to Delta Vega. Let's also pretend that, for whatever reason, Spock voluntarily resigns his position as captain. This hypothetical ending to Act Two would certainly have less emotional impact than the film version.

Since Kirk would have less obstacles to overcome, it would also likely result in a less developed third act. Unless outside complications were introduced to the story, the ending would've been infinitely less engaging.

This lesson underscores a critical point: *the more obstacles your hero has to overcome, the more engaging your story will be, and the more audiences will be entertained.* While this holds true throughout your screenplay, it's especially pertinent to your script's finale.

Trough Type #5: Social Alienation

This trough type—of which emotional pain is a bedrock—can occur wherever there's potential for a rift between the hero and other characters, either another protagonist or a supporting player.

Regardless of a screenplay's genre, premise, or plot, relationship dynamics are at the heart of any good story. For that reason, this trough type often occurs in tandem with another.

For example, once a hero unmask himself (trough type #1), he usually alienates everyone whom he has deceived. In this situation, alienation's the effect rather than the cause. In stories where the hero gets banished (trough type #4), alienation typically is the cause, while banishment is the effect.

For instance, in LIAR LIAR, Fletcher Reede's imprisonment (trough type #2) so thoroughly alienates his ex-wife that she plans to move across the country with their son, effectively banishing Fletcher from their lives (trough type #4).

In a similar nexus of interlaced troughs, once John is unmasked to Claire in WEDDING CRASHERS (trough type #1), she—along with the rest of the Cleary family—is so thoroughly alienated, he's summarily ejected from the Cleary compound (trough type #4).

It should be noted, however, that banishment and alienation do not always go hand in hand. Although Romeo is banished from Verona, he's still deeply in love with Juliet. In DIRTY DANCING, Johnny is banished from a Catskill Mountain resort, but if he could stay, he and Baby would carry on their summer romance.

In LEGALLY BLONDE, when Elle decides to go into self-imposed exile, she and Emmett remain on good terms. In fact, she tells him to give her a call if he's ever in California. Even though Emma Thompson's character becomes alienated from her husband when she discovers he's been emotionally unfaithful to her in LOVE ACTUALLY, she doesn't banish him from her life or from their home.

Alienation can occur in any kind of relationship, whether between friends (UP, CLUELESS, MEAN GIRLS), mentors and their protégés (THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK), colleagues (MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE IV – GHOST PROTOCOL, A FEW GOOD MEN), or family members (DIVINE SECRETS OF THE YA-YA SISTERHOOD, THE BLIND SIDE).

Nevertheless, rifts between romantic partners are by far the most common, arising in a vast array of genres. The most

prototypical examples can be found in romantic comedies, but the rom-com certainly doesn't possess sole jurisdiction over heartache.

A wounded heart can be found at the end of Act Two in romantic dramas (*THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY*), romantic thrillers (*THE BODYGUARD*), action movies (*THE BOURNE IDENTITY*), action comedies (*KNIGHT AND DAY*), raunchy comedies (*BRIDESMAIDS*), workplace comedies (*THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA*), and tragicomedies (*ERIN BROCKOVICH*).

All of these rifts—regardless of relationship type—share one major commonality. They are rooted in betrayal.

If you employ this trough type in your screenplay, it's critical to figure out the nature of this betrayal. How does it happen? Why do your protagonist(s) feel betrayed?

Answering these questions will determine not just your Act Two ending, but the scope of your plot, and perhaps, the nature of your theme.

Studying the five betrayal variants below will hopefully provide ample fodder for your muse.

Betrayal Variant #1: Unwillingness to Commit

In this kind of betrayal, one protagonist can't commit to the relationship to the extent another character would like. Oftentimes, it's the heroine who demands more from the hero than he's willing to give.

Vivian wants the fairy tale in *PRETTY WOMAN*, Dorothy wants a soul mate in *JERRY MAGUIRE*, Kate wants a family in *FOUR CHRISTMASSES*, and Sally wants more than friendship in *WHEN HARRY MET SALLY*.

THE HOLIDAY puts a fresh twist on this beat by having the hero, Graham, yearn for a deeper level of commitment than the heroine, Amanda, can provide.

A lack of commitment isn't limited to romantic entanglements. A hero (especially an anti-hero) may lack passion for a cause for which other characters are willing to sacrifice their lives. That's why Storm demands that Wolverine choose a side in *X-MEN*.

It's also why Luke and Leia are so distraught when Han Solo decides to abandon the resistance movement and resume his mercenary lifestyle in *STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE*. (To be clear, this example is from the beginning of Act Three rather than from the end of Act Two.)

Admittedly, there's something a little mundane about a hero unwilling to commit to a partner or cause. It seems trite and ordinary. But don't underestimate its power.

This betrayal variant is effective, precisely because it's so universal. Everyone in the audience can relate to it, because at some point in their lives, they've all been in a position where they've wanted more from another person than he or she could give.

Betrayal Variant #2: Choosing Work over Love

In *Writing the Romantic Comedy*, Billy Merit describes this kind of betrayal as a swivel “because the protagonist is forced to turn one way or another: he either chooses love over his original goal or sacrifices love to get that goal.” We're going to focus on the latter option, although either way, the hero's choice is going to alienate someone.

In *THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT*, *THE BODYGUARD*, and *MISS CONGENIALITY*, the heroes all choose their work over their appealing leading ladies. Notably, in *ERIN BROCKOVICH*, it's the heroine who chooses work over her love interest.

Since the story stakes in this film are far more important than one individual's heartache, we're supportive of her decision. This is quite rare. In response to this story beat, audiences usually shake their heads in exasperation, rather than nod in understanding.

Notice that in all four of the above examples, the hero and/or heroine's employment plays a dominant role in the story, and is in fact, at the core of each movie's plot. It may seem very obvious, but it'd be remiss of me not to spell it out: *this*

betrayal variant only works if the protagonist's profession plays a central role in the story.

If the hero of your screenplay doesn't log a lot of hours at his job, then this form of betrayal is probably not going to be an option in your script.

Betrayal Variant #3: Engaging in Large-Scale Deception

In this betrayal variant, one of the protagonists discovers that the person whom he or she trusted has been lying to them all along (trough type #1). Alienation invariably follows this discovery.

We've already covered this topic extensively in the "Hero Unmasked" section of this chapter, so I won't go into more detail here.

Betrayal Variant #4: Inviting an Interloper

Like choosing career over love, in this betrayal variant, the protagonist chooses a third party over the hero (or heroine). This third party, whom the audience perceives as an interloper, comes in all shapes and forms.

He or she may be a cutthroat bridesmaid (Helen in BRIDESMAIDS), a fickle lover (both Jasper and Maggie in THE HOLIDAY), a sick sibling (Sarah's brother in LOVE ACTUALLY), a wealthy soldier (Lon in THE NOTEBOOK), a wealthy politician (Andrew in SWEET HOME ALABAMA), or a wealthy heiress (Willoughby's eventual wife in SENSE AND SENSIBILITY).

Intriguingly, in both BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY 1 and 2, Mark Darcy believes—mistakenly—that Bridget has chosen rival Daniel Cleaver over himself.

As the examples above illustrate, this betrayal variant is often a component in any screenplay dominated by a love triangle, a plot type which carries its own special set of challenges. Although in the modern dating world, it may be okay to see more than one person at the same time, in the movies, audiences are usually less accepting of this practice.

If the hero is dating someone else, but falls for the heroine, he can't behave in a way which violates the relationship he's currently in. This can cause irreparable harm to his likeability (an important factor we'll discuss more in depth in the "Genre" section of Part IV).

At the same time, if the hero and the heroine never share any emotional intimacy, then audiences can't truly invest in the couple's relationship, and their rift at the end of Act Two will be devoid of any impact.

THE WEDDING PLANNER is a prime example of this conundrum. The concept—a wedding planner (Mary) who falls for the groom (Steve) in the wedding ceremony she's overseeing—is rich with irony, which is a good thing. At least in theory.

In practice, it's a different story. Steve walks a delicate tightrope. He has to show that he has deep feelings for Mary, without behaving unfaithfully to his bride. Unfortunately, the movie never quite achieves the right balance, and the supposed romance between Mary and Steve comes across as more insipid than inspiring.

MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING, another love triangle set against the backdrop of weddings, managed to succeed where THE WEDDING PLANNER failed. Michael and Jules exhibit their fair share of chemistry. Yet, it never seems like Michael is dishonoring his engagement to Kimmy.

How did this romantic comedy accomplish this trick? Simple. Michael and Jules were best friends *long before he ever met his fiancée*. Their intimacy has evolved over years of seeing each other through everything: "losing jobs, losing parents, and losing lovers."

This shared history enables Michael to stay true to Kimmy, while still persuading audiences to invest in his relationship with Jules. (Note that the specter of the past also works to the heroine's advantage in THE NOTEBOOK, SWEET HOME ALABAMA, and FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL.)

There's another solution to explore: time the relationships with the precision of a Swiss stopwatch. From the ashes of one romance, a new one blossoms.

For instance, in *THE HOLIDAY*, Miles truly bonds with Iris only after he breaks it off with his fickle girlfriend, Maggie. In *THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA*, once Andy ends her relationship with her boyfriend, she's free to do more than just flirt with a dashing young reporter.

In *SOMETHING'S GOTTA GIVE*, Erica's relationship with a young doctor only becomes serious after she and Harry part ways. (And her relationship with Harry only begins after the scoundrel ended his fling with Erica's daughter.)

In the first *BRIDGET JONES*, the heroine's interest in Mark Darcy only goes into hyperdrive after she's bid farewell to Daniel Cleaver. Interestingly, these developments occur in reverse in the film's sequel, *THE EDGE OF REASON*.

Two quick notes: (1), the more sophisticated your characters are or the darker your movie's tone, the more you can stretch the boundaries of propriety without ruining your protagonists' likeability.

(2), the presence of a third party doesn't always mean that the interloper causes the rift between the protagonist and the love interest we're rooting for.

In both *SOMETHING'S GOTTA GIVE* and *WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING*, the heroine would choose the hero (suitor A) in a heartbeat, but settles for an interloper (suitor B) because suitor A, following betrayal variant #1, couldn't commit to her the way she wanted.

Betrayal Variant #5: Violating Unwritten Rules

Mentor, student. Friend, friend. Colleague, colleague. Boss, employee. Boyfriend, girlfriend. Husband, wife. Parent, child.

Each of these relationships is governed by an unwritten code possessing a labyrinthine complexity, characteristic of the bylaws of a corporation swollen to global proportions.

When someone in the relationship violates one of these sacrosanct rules, estrangement quickly ensues. Because these unwritten rules are often character-driven, there's no limit to the ways this betrayal variant can manifest itself.

For instance, in *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE IV – GHOST PROTOCOL*, Ethan Hunt rounds on Brandt. "And you're just an analyst?" Ethan asks angrily. "Right? Right?" When Ethan proceeds to threaten Brandt with a gun, Brandt disarms Ethan with lightening quick reflexes, proving Ethan's point: Brandt isn't really an analyst, but a field agent.

By hiding his training, Brandt hasn't broken any rules in the IMF handbook (at least to our knowledge), so why is Ethan so upset?

Ethan's angry because Brandt joined Ethan's team under false pretenses, breaking the gentleman's code between spies working for the same organization.

In *PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN 2: DEAD MAN'S CHEST*, Captain Sparrow stays true to the self-serving laws of the Pirate's Code, as laid down "by the pirates Morgan and Bartholomew during the second meeting of the Brethren Court."

Nobody can fault him for that. Then why is Elizabeth outraged when she discovers Sparrow has betrayed her fiancé (and his friend) to Davy Jones?

Because Sparrow violated the unspoken rules of conduct she believed governed their friendship: Sparrow can behave like a double-crossing pirate to everyone else, but not to *her*.

In *CLUELESS*, Cher violates neither the rules of spy code, nor the rules of Pirate Code, but the rules of girl code. When her protégé Tai professes her affection for Cher's ex-stepbrother, Cher responds with little enthusiasm, causing Tai to exit Cher's mansion in a huff.

In Tai's eyes, if Cher were a true, supportive girlfriend, Cher would've encouraged Tai with the zeal normally reserved for shopping on Rodeo Drive.

In *CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON*, Jade Fox trains Jen, the governor's daughter, in the art of Wudang. When Jen realizes that her skills far surpass her mentor's, she hides the depth of her abilities from Jade. Eventually,

however, Jen confesses the truth.

Later on, Jade reveals how much Jen's revelation devastated her. Having pierced one of the heroes with a poisoned arrow, Jade tells him that he deserves to die...but that he was not her intended victim. "The life I was hoping to take... was Jen's."

Jade then addresses her wayward protégée. "Ten years, I devoted to you. But you deceived me! You hid the manual's true meaning. I never improved, but your progress was limitless! You know what poison is? An eight-year-old girl full of deceit. That's poison!"

Reaching out to Jen, Jade utters her final words. "Jen! My only family. My only enemy." This example is particularly fascinating because this betrayal is rooted in cultural values. In Western cultures, Jen's secrecy about her talents might've been hurtful to a mentor, but wouldn't be devastating enough to drive her to murder.

Sometimes, the hero doesn't break implicit rules but explicit promises which have been articulated in advance. Take UP. Curmudgeon Carl explicitly promises Russell that he'll protect a flightless mamma bird.

But when push comes to shove, Carl reneges on his promise, leaving the bird in the clutches of an insane explorer. Ever the idealist, Russell responds by abandoning Carl and hatching his own plan to rescue the poor avian.

Avoid Drawing Lines in the Sand

To be clear, the distinctions between each betrayal variant are fluid. When Luke abandons his Jedi training to save his friends in THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK, is he showing a lack of commitment to the rebel cause (betrayal variant #1) or is he choosing love—in the form of friendship—over work (betrayal variant #2)?

When Brad freaks out because Kate wants marriage and children in FOUR CHRISTMASSES, is he showing a lack of commitment to their coupling (betrayal variant #1) or is she reneging on the pact which governed their heretofore happy relationship (betrayal variant #5)?

When Andy's boyfriend breaks up with her in THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA, is he more upset that she's catering to the whims of her demanding boss instead of spending time with him (betrayal variant #2) or that she's morphing into a person he doesn't recognize (betrayal variant #5)?

It's not necessary to rigidly box your betrayal variant into one specific category. But it is critical to understand the effect you're aiming for. That way, when it comes time to revise your script, you'll be better able to determine which subplot needs to be trimmed down or how to refine critical lines of dialogue.

For example, the break-up conversation between Erica and Harry would play out far differently in SOMETHING'S GOTTA GIVE if she had been more enamored of her doctor suitor and less concerned about Harry's inability to commit.

To put it another way, the more clearly you can articulate the relationship dynamics between your characters to yourself, the more likely the individual components of your screenplay will form one harmonious whole.

Speaking of harmony, it's important to acknowledge that social alienation isn't obligatory. Any core relationship in your screenplay is definitely a prime candidate for this kind of trough type. But in certain cases, it's perhaps better to keep these allegiances intact.

9 TO 5, THELMA AND LOUISE, and BRIDESMAIDS are all successful films which celebrate the power of female friendship. However, out of the trio, BRIDESMAIDS is the only film to make that point by tearing that friendship apart.

Trough Type #6: The Vanishing Ally

TOP GUN didn't become a worldwide hit because of its high-flying action sequences. Or because of Tom Cruise's effortless charm. Or because of his steamy scenes with Kelly McGillis. Do you want to know the real secret to TOP GUN's success? I'll tell ya: it's Goose.

Goose's death made that movie.

Without it, the film would've been an adrenaline-pumping bundle of special effects wrapped up in a killer soundtrack.

Goose's death took this movie—which, let's face it, has a paper-thin plot—and transformed it into something more.

That's due to the power of this particular manifestation of the vanishing ally trough type. It has tremendous ability to evoke emotion (without the hassle of setting up a resurrection device).

This is perhaps why its impact is so profound. If a hero seems to die at the end of Act Two, audiences subconsciously expect him to come back to life. Not so with an ally. In contrast to heroes, supporting characters are much more expendable.

When they die, they're gone for good.

The action movie *SPEED* is a classic example. Jack and Harry, best friends and LAPD SWAT team specialists, are trying to thwart a madman from blowing up a city bus. If the bus goes below 50 miles per hour, the bomb will explode.

To work the "inside" angle, Jack boards the doomed vehicle. Harry is tasked with the "outside" angle: using police resources to figure out the identity of the villain. Harry succeeds, gleefully proclaiming to Jack that they found "the scumbag."

Harry's victory, sadly, is short-lived. Having planned for this eventuality, the bomber booby-trapped his home. When Harry storms the residence, it explodes, killing him instantly.

Before Harry's death, on an abstract level, audiences were certainly invested in seeing Jack turn the tables on the villain and save the passengers on the ill-fated bus.

But their emotions couldn't run deep. How could they, when audiences barely know the passengers?

Harry's a different story. Audiences have had all of Act One to bond with him. They've had all of Acts One and Two to bond with his best friend, Jack.

Which makes Harry's loss hurt.

Not on an abstract level, but on *a personal one*. As a result, audiences' emotional investment skyrocketed.

The intensity of that engagement was a critical factor in elevating *SPEED* above the average action movie. (Okay, okay. The sizzling chemistry of the co-stars and the stunt with the baby carriage helped too.)

So far, our examples of the vanishing ally trough type have focused on death. But there are other ways for supporting characters to "vanish" from a story. For instance, in *BATMAN BEGINS*, the CEO of Wayne Enterprises banishes Lucius Fox from the company. "I'm merging your department with Archives...and I'm firing you."

Lucius is a valuable ally, providing Bruce Wayne with numerous "gifts," including a military tank which can make "ramp-less jumps," a Nomex body suit with Kevlar bi-weave, as well as the antidote to the poison about to permeate Gotham City.

As such, his loss is critical. Without Lucius's priceless expertise, it's pretty much impossible for Bruce Wayne to maintain his superhero alter ego. Thankfully, this setback was easily reversed. After all, as Bruce observes to Lucius, a revoked security clearance shouldn't be a problem for a man of Lucius's talents.

Nonetheless, supporting characters rarely vanish via banishment. It's much more common for them to be captured. Hence, their rescue will, in large part, define the plot of Act Three. For example, in *X-MEN*, Rogue, a young mutant who can temporarily absorb the special powers of her fellow mutants, is abducted by the villain, Magneto.

Interestingly, this capture is preceded by trough type #4. (After a tragic accident in which Rogue almost kills Wolverine, a powerful mutant as well as her friend, she goes into self-imposed exile, abruptly abandoning Professor Xavier's school for mutants like herself.)

Even more interesting, for most of the movie, we believe that for some unknown, but nefarious, reason, Magneto wants to capture Wolverine. Of course, of the two, Wolverine seems like more of a badass. He's got claws—claws!—made from indestructible metal. His body can heal itself, making him virtually invincible.

In comparison, Rogue's special power is pathetic. Plus, because it involves stealing from other mutants, it carries a

negative stigma. If that weren't enough, Professor Xavier also believes that Magneto is after Wolverine. Absorbing his point of view, audiences are unlikely to question his assumption. (And really, who would doubt the word of a wise old man in a wheelchair?)

Only at the film's trough do audiences learn the truth. Rogue, not Wolverine, is whom Magneto seeks.

This creates a wonderful surprise, made all the more compelling because it's crafted from solid storytelling—not contrivance.

The same, unfortunately, can't be said of the vanishing ally act soon to follow. Having been poisoned, Professor Xavier is taken out of commission for the film's climax.

While this is certainly a scheme right up Magneto's alley, it fairly reeks of *eau de convenience*. (Perhaps, if it had been less hastily executed, it would've seemed less arbitrary. Perhaps, I'm picking at straws.)

One more point about X-MEN before we move on. Rogue has a fair share of screentime, and several story events revolve around her presence. Is she really a supporting character? Or is she one of the heroes?

In ensemble casts especially, it's hard to distinguish between the two. I'm leaning towards the sidekick end of the spectrum; you may lean towards the opposite direction.

But what's a little quibbling between friends?

Whether Rogue's captivity is classified as trough type #2 or whether it's classified as trough type #6, it's great storytelling, pure and simple.

The capture of Lady Marian Dubois in ROBIN HOOD: PRINCE OF THIEVES is another wonderful example of this trough type in action. In a scene rich with irony, in order to alert Robin about Marian's abduction, a blind servant leads Sheriff Nottingham's men straight to Robin's secret home in Sherwood Forest. Indeed, sabotaging the hero by stealing his love interest is a common ploy made by villains in action movies.

However, a small detail from Marian's backstory transforms this potentially run-of-the-mill story beat into something else altogether. Marian's not an ordinary blue blood. She's related to the king.

If the Sheriff weds her and beds her, in the absence of King Richard, the Sheriff could make a legitimate claim to England's throne. It's a conniving—brilliant—maneuver which makes the Sheriff an even more formidable an opponent. (Considering the tyrant's misdeeds, this is no small feat.)

This complication achieves even more than that. The Sheriff's devious plan also ups the story stakes. Should Robin fail to rescue Marian, his happiness isn't all that hangs in the balance. The fate of an *entire nation* does too.

Amazing how a small tweak in Marian's backstory could accomplish so much, eh?

Monster, Mummy, and Matrix Bait

Earlier, in Part I, we discussed the importance of showing the value of whatever (or whomever) the hero loses at the end of Act Two. This is especially true of the vanishing ally trough type.

In order for this loss to have emotional impact, it's imperative that audiences understand why this ally is so valuable to the hero. To illustrate this point, we can compare the second and third HARRY POTTER movies.

In the second installment of the franchise, THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS, Harry endures an extensive trough of hell which culminates in the disappearance of Ginny Weasley, who vanishes into the eponymous chamber.

It's easy to understand how her disappearance affects Ron, Ginny's older brother. Since Ron is Harry's best friend, it's also easy to understand how this, by extension, affects Harry. But all of this understanding is, for the most part, rational. It merely scratches at the surface of the human heart.

How can Ginny's disappearance elicit strong emotion from audiences when she's barely been part of the story? After our first introduction to her, she basically lurks in the background, a shadow whose presence audiences remember, but don't

connect to.

In contrast, the capture of Sirius Black in *THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN* has much more emotional impact. A few minutes prior to his capture, Sirius asks Harry if he would like to move in with him. “I don’t know if you know, Harry, but when you were born, James and Lily [Harry’s parents] made me your godfather. And I can understand if you choose to stay where you are, with your aunt and uncle, but if you ever wanted a different home...it’s just a thought.” However, Sirius’s impending Azkaban imprisonment—and death—renders this understated invitation null and void.

Although Sirius figures more prominently in this movie than Ginny did in *THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS*, his screentime amounts to very little. For that reason, audiences’ reaction to his death sentence (well, soul-sucking, if you want to get technical) would be more intellectual than emotional in nature if they didn’t precisely understand how much his offer means to Harry.

They’ve observed Harry’s aunt and uncle at close quarters, have witnessed their pettiness and cruelty firsthand. (Not just in this movie either, but in the two films which preceded it too.) They know just how much Harry desperately yearns for a different home.

Sirius’s offer of guardianship is a gift as, if not more, magical than any spell or wand at Hogwarts. But now that Sirius has been captured, this gift is tragically wrenched from Harry’s grasp.

Because audiences’ emotional reaction will be proportionate to the perceived value of the hero’s loss, the disappearance of Sirius as an ally goes beyond the surface, penetrating the very internal chambers of their hearts. (In fairness to *THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS*, the loss of two other allies—Hermione and Hagrid—supplies the emotional weight lacking from Ginny’s.)

In some (rare) cases, a supporting character partakes of the spotlight to such a degree that audiences bond intensely with him—so much so, that they will feel the impact of his loss, irrespective of his value to the hero.

THE HUNGER GAMES is a textbook example. Even though Rue helps Katniss destroy their rivals’ food supply, the young tribute from District 11 is more of a liability than an asset. And their friendship, while meaningful to Katniss, takes up a modicum of screentime.

Despite these circumstances, Rue’s death packs an emotional wallop. Audiences don’t mourn Rue’s death because it hurts Katniss; they mourn Rue’s death in and of itself.

Why?

The answer’s complicated. Rue’s age is certainly a factor. The death of a child (or animal) can instantaneously elicit a strong emotional reaction. The grotesque injustice of the Games makes it all the worse.

This is where amateur screenwriters make a fatal error in judgment. They assume that death will *always* elicit an outpouring of emotion. They fail to realize that Rue’s death is an exception rather than the rule.

In the majority of cases, their vanishing ally is going to be (mercifully) an adult rather than a child. In the vast majority of cases, the laws which govern their story are going to be (again mercifully) more just than the ones which govern Panem.

Therefore, most screenwriters can’t rely solely on death’s gruesomeness to get audiences emotionally invested at this key juncture. They have to show the value of this loss or, alternately, forge a strong bond between this vanishing ally and audiences.

At this point, you might be wondering when I’m going to discuss monster, mummy, and Matrix bait. That is, after all, the title of this section. Relax, grasshopper. I’m getting to that.

In some screenplays, the cast is purposefully large, in order to provide convenient allies for the villain to pick off one by one. As Alex Epstein points out in *Crafty Screenwriting*, the cast of the 1999 remake of *THE MUMMY* was enlarged to create more mummy bait. “We want to show how powerful and evil the mummy is, so we want some people to suffer horrible fates at his hands. Of course we should get to know them before the mummy kills them, so we care when he does.”

That last sentence is particularly important. If the “bait” doesn’t have enough screentime, his eventual death will have

little impact on audiences. (Incidentally, Epstein's explanation of how to reverse engineer a complete cast of characters from your premise is worth the price of the book alone.)

In the case of *THE MUMMY*, I'd contend that even if the individual personalities comprising a competing group of American archeologists didn't quite register on audiences, their deaths still would've deepened audience engagement. That's because sucking the life from each archeologist enables the mummy to fully regenerate.

When that happens, the mummy will fear nothing. Each killing therefore augments the mummy's powers, making him even more formidable a foe. Because audiences will become more afraid for the hero's well-being, correspondingly, their emotional involvement will automatically intensify.

Moving on to *THE MATRIX*, several members of Morpheus's resistance fighters are killed at the end of the movie's second act. The majority of them have little screentime, so the deaths of these allies carry little emotional weight.

Even so, Cypher's stealthy attack on each of his comrades is a powerful scene because *their deaths are a prelude to the ones which really count*. After Cypher dispatches with Tank, Dozer, Apoc, and Switch, only Neo, Trinity, and Morpheus are left. And there's no one to stop Cypher from harming these key characters—currently unable to defend themselves.

Audiences not only know *these* characters, they also care about them. Thus, while every act of murder may lack significant emotional impact, each ratchets up the tension. Think about this scene's effect if Neo, Trinity, and Morpheus weren't at risk. Cypher's killing spree would've lacked both dramatic tension and emotional impact, rendering it fairly pointless.

It's the Hitchcockian difference between showing a bomb blowing up two people sitting at a desk and showing those same two people merrily chatting as a bomb ticks away in the desk drawer.

In many amateur screenplays, the deaths of several supporting characters accomplish nothing. These deaths don't underscore the strength of the villain. Nor do they amplify the dramatic tension. That is another fault of the 2010 remake of *CLASH OF THE TITANS*.

The cast is large, purposefully expendable. In fact, in a 2007 draft of the screenplay, we're instructed not to strain to keep Perseus's fellow soldiers straight because they're all "monster fodder."

In essence, a large proportion of the cast is one-dimensional, only existing to be eaten by the monster(s). Since these characters are one-dimensional and have little screentime, audiences don't feel so deeply when the fodder actually dies.

The takeaway lesson here is that if your script contains a lot of carnage, but this carnage doesn't (a) bolster the villain's power or (b) ratchet up the tension and/or (c) create a moment of emotional impact, then you're not really writing a swashbuckler or an epic or a thriller (or some combination thereof).

You're verging into splatter territory. Unless that's your target audience, you're making a fatal mistake.

One way to tell if the death of a vanishing ally has emotional impact is through his or her name. If a studio reader or audience member can identify who that character is **by name** (without flipping back through the script, or consulting IMDB.com), then odds are the writer has laid down enough groundwork to make these individuals care about this ally's death.

This isn't a full-proof test, mind you, but it works pretty well. When you're revising your own script, it's difficult to be objective about these matters. You created this ally out of thin air. Of course *you* know his name. Of course *you* care about his death. Won't everyone else care too?

This is where an outsider's opinion especially comes in handy. If you hand your screenplay to a writing pal (or a script consultant), this is one question to put at the top of your list.

The Bait and Switch

There is one final way that allies can vanish. They aren't killed. They aren't banished. They aren't captured.

No, this type of disappearance is far more subtle: they reveal their true nature.

They morph from friend to foe.

On the surface, this trough type may seem to be the same as unmasking the hero. But this kind of deception can be distinguished from trough type #1 in two primary ways. For one thing, it's a supporting character—not the hero—who's perpetuating the sham.

For another, audiences are not in on the deceit from the beginning. The reversal from friend to foe shocks them just as much as it surprises the hero.

To illustrate, let's return to *HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN*. Sirius Black is not the only ally who vanishes during Harry's trough of hell. Harry trusts his Defense against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Lupin, implicitly.

However, it's revealed that the good professor has been withholding two major secrets from his pupils: one, he's a werewolf, and two, he's in league with Sirius Black (whom at this particular moment we believe is Harry's nemesis).

These revelations are quickly followed by others. In an intriguing reversal of the vanishing ally, we learn that Sirius Black was not responsible, as previously assumed, for the death of Harry's parents, a revelation which transforms Sirius from foe to friend. The true culprit is another man altogether—Peter Pettigrew—a fake ally, who, as it happens, has been masquerading as the Weasley family's pet rat for the last twelve years.

While ingenious, these examples are most likely impractical to implement in your particular genre, so let's take a look at a couple of other examples. Take the first movie in the *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE* film franchise. When a secret op goes horribly wrong, everyone on Ethan Hunt's espionage team dies. Well, almost everyone.

Claire Phelps, the young wife of Ethan's team leader, is alive and well, comforting Ethan as he tries to clear his name. But behind her seductive smiles lies a harsh truth. Her husband—and Ethan's mentor—is also alive. In fact, Jim Phelps is the agency mole who set up Ethan to take the fall for his own misdeeds.

The above example is powerful because this vanishing ally trough type came in pairs. Both Claire and Jim pulled the bait and switch on Ethan. But less dramatic executions of this trough type can be just as effective.

Look at *JUNO*. In the offbeat comedy, teenager Juno MacGuff selects Vanessa and Mark Loring to be the adoptive parents of her soon-to-be-born baby. Vanessa's extremely keen. According to her, she was born to be a mother. Although less enthusiastic, Mark, too, seems to be on board with the idea, expressing the desire to coach the child's soccer team and help out with science fair projects.

Eventually, Mark confesses to Juno that he's planning to leave his wife and rent a bachelor apartment in the city. Since Juno's made several quips about the "tight leash" Vanessa keeps him on, Mark thought Juno would be pleased by the news. He thought wrong. Juno's not pleased; she's furious.

She chose the Loring's because she wanted them to give her baby everything she couldn't—a privileged upbringing by two loving parents. By jeopardizing her plan, by refusing to grow up, Mark has transformed from her friend to her foe—a subtle, yet perfect, illustration of the vanishing ally.

Of all the trough types, the bait and switch is my favorite because it accomplishes so many storytelling goals. The transformation of an ally into a foe delights and dismays audiences in equal parts. They are delighted by the plot twist, but at the same time, they're dismayed by the complication it creates for the hero.

Additionally, this trough reinforces the bond between hero and audience, both of whom have been terribly deceived by the fickle ally. This dynamic also enables you to bring your hero to his "all is lost" moment without betraying his intelligence. He's not in a scrape now because he got stupid, but because he put his trust in the wrong person—a lapse of judgment audiences are usually willing to forgive.

In *The Anatomy of Story*, John Truby outlines more benefits: "One. It provides an exciting pop in what is often a slow section of the plot. Two. It shows the audience the true power of the opposition. Three. It allows the audience to see certain hidden plot elements played out dramatically and visually."

(Note: in Truby parlance, this plot twist is called the "fake-ally opponent," and according to him, the audience always learns the big reveal *before* the hero.)

Despite these multiple benefits, this plot twist isn't used that frequently. You yourself may be hesitant to make use of it, especially since it requires an extra dose of finesse to execute.

How exactly do you morph a friend into a foe without giving away the surprise? Fortunately, I'm about to clue you in to the secret to nailing this tricky bugger:

The Secret Sauce to Turning Friends into Foes

The secret to pulling off the bait and switch is to focus more on the "bait" and less on the "switch." The key, you see, is all about creating a first impression that's the antithesis of this character's true nature.

Once that first impression is made, audiences will cheerfully believe this ally is an ally—right up until your big reveal. The more they believe in this character's innocence, the greater their surprise at the critical moment, and the greater their ensuing engagement and enjoyment.

THE FUGITIVE is a grade A example of how to execute this story stunt. Hero Richard Kimble is a vascular surgeon who's falsely convicted of killing his wife. On the night of his wife's murder, his good friend, Dr Nichols, returns the keys to Kimble's car, a small detail which speaks of their longtime friendship.

But while a critical part of the setup, this introduction is so fleeting, Nichols doesn't really make an impression on audiences. That only occurs afterwards, when Kimble, now a fugitive, accosts Nichols's shiny green BMW and asks him for money.

Does Dr Charles Nichols scream in shock? Does he hurl accusations at Kimble? Does he grip his steering wheel with such fear that his knuckles go white?

No, not at all.

He offers Kimble his help and calmly gives Kimble money. Later, Nichols will tell Gerard, the US Marshal hunting Kimble, that he gave Kimble "a couple of bucks, just what I had on me." It was, however, more than a couple of bucks. It was enough for Kimble to buy a new wardrobe and to rent accommodation from a Polish family.

Following this admission to Gerard, Nichols reinforces his positive first impression, affirming Kimble's innocence and refusing to assist the government to bring Kimble in.

After such a vow, who would suspect that Nichols is anything but Kimble's staunch supporter? Who would suspect that Nichols is in fact the arch-villain behind the one-armed man who killed Kimble's wife? Who, indeed?

That, my friend, is how you turn a friend into a foe.

Like THE FUGITIVE, CASINO ROYALE also demonstrates mastery of this technique. When James Bond first journeys to Montenegro, he and Vesper meet up with Bond's MI6 contact Mathis, an agent who exudes a winning combination of charm and ingenuity.

At their meeting, Mathis reveals to them that Le Chiffre and the chief of police are "now quite close," a state of affairs which could make life "difficult and much shorter."

Mathis then reveals his strategy to handle the problem. "I thought about trying to buy his services, but we frankly, couldn't afford to outbid Le Chiffre." As Mathis continues to explain, police sirens blare in the background. "I decided that it was cheaper to supply his deputy with evidence that we were bribing the chief." Behind the café table where the trio is situated, the police chief in question is carted off by members of his own force.

After handling this dicey situation so cleverly and after improving Bond's odds of success so vastly, Mathis creates a positive first impression and rises immeasurably in our esteem. Who would suspect that he himself poses a greater threat?

As Le Chiffre will later gloat, "You see Mr Bond, your Mr Mathis, was really *my* Mr Mathis." A truth which no one—least of all Bond—would be likely to suspect.

The gripping thriller doesn't stop there. Mathis isn't the only ally to vanish; another key character also possesses mixed loyalties. In a brilliant move, the movie doesn't reveal this person's true allegiances at Bond's trough of hell, but delays

the revelation until the very end, creating one final explosive surprise for audiences to enjoy.

Another favorite example of mine is from *THE BODYGUARD*. Superstar Rachel Marron's been on the receiving end of hate mail and death threats. As a result, to Rachel's displeasure, her manager hires brooding bodyguard Frank Farmer to protect her.

Objecting to Rachel's objections, her sister, Nicki, actively encourages Rachel to reconsider. Hence, our first impression is one of a solicitous sister.

Much later, Frank learns that Nicki used to perform too, but she quit because "it was pretty obvious who the star in our family was." Outwardly, Nicki seems content to live in her sister's shadow.

But inside, Nicki's filled with seething jealousy, so much so, *she's* the one who hired a contract killer to eliminate Rachel for good. Paying the ultimate price for her betrayal, Nicki is shot by a bullet intended for her sister—a clever, if chilling, example of how the same supporting character can vanish in two different ways.

For the record, it's not always critical to have your vanishing ally create a positive first impression on audiences, especially if you're using it for its ability to create dramatic tension rather than to generate surprise. For example, in *AIR FORCE ONE*, audiences soon discover that one of the president's Secret Service agents is not an ally, but a foe working in cahoots with the villain.

Making this revelation early on, rather than delaying it, puts the audience in a superior position to the hero, suffusing the story with dramatic tension. Because of this, when the president dispatches with the primary villain—which he does fairly quickly in the third act—the ending still has the power to captivate audiences. They can't be bored, not when they're anticipating the moment when the disloyal Secret Service agent will make his move and reveal his true colors to the president.

True to form, *THE MATRIX* does something quite different and unusual with the bait and switch tactic. As we recently covered, Cypher killed many of his own teammates—behavior most unbecoming of an ally and a gentleman.

But the movie doesn't wait long to show audiences that Cypher is really a foe to the primary protagonists. In fact, the movie doesn't wait long at all.

At the very beginning, audiences hear—but don't see—Cypher talking to Trinity about Neo. Containing hints of restrained jealousy, Cypher's voice is slightly creepy. Because Cypher doesn't speak at length until 56 minutes later, it might take a while for audiences to consciously piece everything together and match Cypher's voice to his on-screen image. Nevertheless, at the subconscious level, audiences have already registered that he's untrustworthy.

Thus, when it's definitively revealed that Cypher is a turncoat, this development doesn't cause much surprise. But it *does* inject the story with a heavy dose of dramatic tension, as audiences wonder when and how he's going to strike. When Cypher finally makes his move, this form of dramatic tension transitions into another, as he kills off "Matrix bait" one by one, inching closer and closer to the heroes audiences care about.

Trough Type #7: Stonewalling

Sometimes—rarely—but sometimes, no one gets captured. No one gets unmasked or banished.

No one dies; no one cries. Allies firmly remain allies.

And even if one of trough types #1 - #6 do occur, they don't make audiences well and truly feel that everything is indeed lost for the hero. No, that only happens when the hero becomes stymied, as if the Great Wall of China had suddenly been erected between him and his goal.

DEJA VU is a great example. ATF agent Doug Carlin wants to catch the criminal responsible for blowing up a New Orleans ferry. To accomplish this, Carlin uses some fancy-schmancy Time Window technology which enables him to see four days (plus a few hours) into the past. (This is a science-fiction thriller. Accept it.) Because Carlin's good at his job, he's able to apprehend the bomber and secure a confession from him in the present day.

Yet, this isn't enough for him. See, Carlin's switched goals on us. He wants to do more than catch the bomber; he wants to save Claire, the bomber's first victim.

In order to do that, Carlin needs to view the past through the Time Window. But since the government's got the confession they needed, a bureaucrat shuts the program down.

BOOM! Great Wall of China.

The same wall makes an appearance in *THE HANGOVER*. To locate their missing friend (Doug) in Las Vegas, the inept wolf pack has been through it all—tasers, tigers, Tyson. And now, it seems success is within their reach. They just have to exchange \$80,000 in blackjack winnings for their dear old Doug.

Only, when they do, to their chagrin (and our delight) they discover they've brokered a deal for the wrong guy. This Doug is black. Their Doug isn't.

BOOM! Great Wall of China.

My favorite example of stonewalling comes from *LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE*. In the subversive comedy, the Hoover family overcomes a range of obstacles in order for Olive to participate in a regional beauty pageant for young girls. Even the death of Olive's granddad can't derail them. However, only a few minutes before the pageant's registration period closes, Olive's brother, Dwayne, discovers he's colorblind.

For another teen, this probably wouldn't be a big deal. But this condition precludes Dwayne from joining the Air Force, the lone bright spot in his angsty adolescent existence.

In severe psychological distress, he demands the family pull over their Volkswagen microbus and abruptly exits the vehicle, refusing to get back in. Without Dwayne, the Hoover family can't proceed to the pageant, and Olive won't be able to register.

BOOM! Great Wall of China.

Generally speaking, stonewalling tends to be the least paradoxical of the seven common trough types. In *DEJA VU*, you can make a fairly solid argument that by shutting down the Time Window, Carlin paradoxically gets closer to achieving his goal of saving Claire, because the shutdown forces Carlin to pursue the risky option of going back in time himself. This change in tactics ultimately saves Claire's life (while, perhaps, straining the film's credibility to the breaking point).

It's hard to say the same with *THE HANGOVER*. Sure, rescuing the wrong Doug leads to a conversation about the etymology of roofies, which ultimately leads to insight into missing Doug's current location. But it's much more of a stretch to say that the wolf pack's "all is lost" moment is the very thing they needed to achieve victory. And if it's a stretch in *THE HANGOVER*, it's basically impossible to make that claim in *LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE*.

To be frank, I wouldn't worry overly much about this trough type (or its lack of a paradox). Out of all the common trough types, it's the least frequently employed. But you shouldn't disregard it completely.

What would the Great Wall of China look like in *your* screenplay? Answering that question may lead you to an unconventional and thoroughly engaging trough of hell.

Choosing the Perfect Trough

As I mentioned earlier, the seven common trough types aren't meant to be a cookie cutter kind of approach to ending the second act of your screenplay. You can't just slap one on at the tail end of Act Two and call it a day.

If you use them as they're intended—as a spring board for your ideas—they will give your imagination and muse some sense of *direction*, making your job as a screenwriter infinitely easier.

When you're generating your script outline, first go through all of the common trough types. Then, brainstorm a few of the plot events and character dynamics which would be necessary in order for each particular trough to occur.

What does the middle of your story look like if your hero is captured at the end of Act Two? What if he dies or is unmasked? What would it look like if he lost one ally? How about two?

When you're done, you should have a list of each trough type along with some of the story elements which that trough necessitates. Of these, which constellation excites you most?

Let your gut guide you first. Then, assess each possibility with more objectivity.

The trough sequence you eventually choose must be true to your:

- premise
- characters
- story world
- genre
- tone, and
- theme

Equally important, it must give audiences a jolly good ride.

Don't be quick to discard seemingly preposterous possibilities. Death isn't standard fare in a romantic comedy, but it definitely worked in *FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL*. Characters aren't normally held hostage in workplace comedies, but that's exactly what happens in *9 TO 5*.

To make certain trough types less outlandish, try making modifications—either to your overall idea or to the trough itself. Is the result an utter mess? Or have you created something new and fresh?

If you have trouble eliminating different trough types because the ones you've come up with are all so good, first, let me congratulate you. To borrow an expression [from author Blake Crouch](#), that's a "I've spilled champagne on my cake" kind of dilemma.

Second, here are some suggestions to help you select the trough which is perfect for your story:

Trough Elimination Test #1: Analyze Post-Inciting Incident Objections

After the inciting incident in a screenplay, various characters usually make objections to whatever action the inciting incident necessitates. The perfect trough could then be the manifestations of those very objections.

As a simple example, the heroine's sister may tell her, "Don't take Brad up on his offer to help. I don't trust him." Thinking her sister is just being her usual paranoid self, the heroine disregards her sibling's advice. But at the heroine's trough of hell, when Brad turns from friend to foe, she discovers her sister's instincts were correct.

Even more diabolical, the person making the objection after the inciting incident could be the one who betrays your hero. (We've already seen an example of this in *THE BODYGUARD*.)

Alternately, the person making the objections could be the one captured or killed during your hero's trough. Or, in less violent stories, the objector could become estranged from your hero. (Note: a detailed explanation of this, which uses *WEDDING CRASHERS* as an example, can be found in my screenwriting guide, *Inciting Incident*.)

You may've realized that this test is also helpful when employed in reverse. Once you settle on the perfect trough for your story, you may want to revise the section of your screenplay right after the inciting incident to create a tighter link between the person making the objections and the events which transpire at the trough.

This is certainly not necessary, and you don't want to get too heavy-handed with it, but it can enhance the overall coherence and integrity of your script.

Trough Elimination Test #2: Remove Repetition

You want to avoid repetition of story beats as much as possible. That's why some trough types have to be dismissed right away.

For instance, in an alternate universe, in *GHOST PROTOCOL*, Sidorov, a Russian investigative officer, could've apprehended Ethan Hunt at the end of Act Two. Ethan, of course, manages to escape and save the day.

This sounds all well and good on the surface—if only it weren't a repeat of the prison break scene which began the movie!

Likewise, in an alternate universe, in *THE FUGITIVE*, Gerard could've caught Dr Kimble at the end of Act Two. Being oh so clever, Kimble manages to escape. But again, that's a pale retread of his escape from the prison bus at the film's beginning.

Things could be modified a bit. Kimble might not have to escape. Instead, he convinces Gerard of his innocence, and together they go after the real killer. But that option is just about as appetizing as a salad without the salad dressing.

If your trough type is just a pale imitation of an earlier story beat, you must discard it or alter the earlier plot event. Either way, you've got to return to the drawing board.

Trough Elimination Test #3: Analyze Climax Objectives

The way your climax unfolds will depend, in large part, on the nature of your trough. These two critical plot points need to be simpatico. Therefore, one way to determine your trough is to reverse engineer it, based on what you want to accomplish during Act Three.

If, for example, you want to add extra drama to the climax and incorporate a rescue op, then the person who needs rescuing first has to be captured.

If the hero needs someone else's help to vanquish the villain, that person can't be killed. Rarely can they transform from friend to foe.

They can, however, be captured, necessitating the aforementioned rescue op. They can also be estranged from the hero, and in order to achieve his goal, the hero must engineer their reconciliation.

If the key to the hero's success resides in a remote location, then the hero has to come into contact with that key first, before he can make use of it—perhaps by being banished to that locale.

If the hero—actually, I'll stop now. I think you get the picture!

Advanced Trough Techniques

At first, selecting the perfect trough sequence may be difficult for you. But once you get the hang of it, it will become second nature—making plotting the rest of Act Two much, much easier.

After you reach this stage, see how far you can stretch the trough types to advance your story. Play around with the super-sophisticated techniques discussed below.

Most of all, have fun!

Advanced Trough Technique #1: Get Psychic

The beginning of this chapter included a caveat which it would behoove us to revisit: the list of seven trough types is a comprehensive compilation of concrete ways to wound a hero, *but it is not exhaustive*.

How could it be, when each hero is unique?

His worst fears, his most devastating wounds may have nothing to do with unmasking, captivity, alienation, etc.

That's why it's a smart strategy to always brainstorm ways to psychically hurt your hero by undercutting his identity. As long as he isn't a generic stock character, then by definition, your trough of hell will be unique and infinitely more compelling.

In some cases, this brainstorming may lead you to create a moment of psychic pain which becomes the cornerstone of your trough. Think of Torrance in *BRING IT ON*. During her trough, she becomes irritated with her fickle boyfriend and alienated from a worthier suitor. She's also ousted as captain of her cheerleading squad, but this setback is so temporary that it has little emotional weight.

The most excruciating experience for her was to perform a copycat cheerleading routine to a crowd who became shocked

into silence. This humiliation, although comedic, is extremely painful for her (and the rest of her squad), and also jeopardizes her avowed goal of winning nationals. Even though it wasn't one of the seven common trough types, it accomplishes exactly what a good trough would.

Follow BRING IT ON's lead. Go beyond the seven trough types. Work backwards solely from character.

What would wound your hero at a deep and personal level? What would be hurtful to him, but not to someone else?

Answering these questions may not only help you develop a cornerstone event of your hero's trough, it may also help you refine a pre-determined trough, deepening its pain as a grace note of sorts. Recall that in IRON MAN, it wasn't enough for Obadiah Stane to kill Tony. He wanted to destroy Tony's legacy as well.

This added detail not only makes Tony's trough more painful, it also makes it more distinctive. Combined, these attributes elicit a greater degree of emotional involvement from audiences than if Obadiah had only been going after Tony's life and/or control of Stark Industries.

In sum, the most compelling—and least generic—troughs are not just painful, paradoxical, and emotionally wrenching. The best troughs are tailor-made for your hero.

Advanced Trough Technique #2: Purposeful Misdirection

A story can be told in a fairly logical, straightforward manner and still be entertaining. But you'll notice that the more experienced writers become, the more they toy with audience expectations—specifically through use of misdirection.

For instance, in the straightforward way, a hero would be captured, and through judicious use of his escape hatch, free himself.

In a less than straightforward way, the hero could be caught *on purpose*. It's his Trojan Horse-trick to sneak past the invincible sentries at the gate. Because of purposeful misdirection, audiences won't know that right away.

For a brief window in time, they'll be completely in the dark. But when they wise up, they'll not only admire the hero's ingenuity, they'll also delight in having the wool temporarily pulled over their eyes. This, of course, isn't something they'd be thrilled over in real life, but at the cinema, they welcome the surprise.

For a more specific example, let's examine THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS. At the end of the second act, audiences know that Hannibal Lecter has managed to free himself from his manacles and escape from a special prison cell erected in a well-guarded Tennessee courthouse.

It also appears that having killed the two policemen on guard duty, he's vacated the premises. That is, at least, how it *appears*. In and of itself, that's gripping stuff. If you had been tasked with the adaptation, you could stop there and be quite pleased with yourself.

However, screenwriter Ted Tally wasn't content to be so straightforward. Audiences had been misled to believe that both guards were dead, but as it turns out, one of them, Pembry, is actually alive. He's then carted away from the courthouse in an ambulance. Believing Hannibal is somewhere inside, police officers do an extensive search, finally discovering a body, clad in inmate whites, lying face-down in the elevator shaft.

Both the police and the audience believe that the body is Hannibal's. But this assumption proves to be incorrect. The body in the elevator shaft belongs to Pembry, a discovery which nullifies the previous assumption. *Pembry wasn't carted away in an ambulance, Hannibal was.* (In case you're wondering why the police didn't realize it before, Hannibal had carved the skin from Pembry's face and used it to mask his own visage.) While this escape attempt is inarguably gruesome, the way it employs misdirection to deliberately lead audiences astray is exceedingly clever.

Be careful with this technique. It does require screenwriting chops to pull off successfully. First of all, you've got to portray two logical alternatives (one being what audiences assumed happened, the other being what actually transpired), both of which must advance the plot while staying true to your characters.

Equally difficult, you must resist the temptation to employ misdirection with too much enthusiasm. If you become overly zealous with this technique, audiences won't feel delighted. They'll start to feel manipulated, and as a result, disengage from your story—the very last thing you want.

Advanced Trough Technique #3: Pain Comes in Pairs

In this method, the hero's trough is crafted from two separate components which could logically take place at this point in the story. Although they are connected to each other, there is usually not a cause and effect relationship between them.

In a prototypical example, component #1 would consist of a painful sequence which fulfills genre requirements (either by death-defying action or by farcical humor) while component #2 would be some kind of emotional blow (often brought out through a subplot).

SPEED is a perfect example. In an exhilarating sequence (component #1), Jack, lying atop a metal dolly, investigates the underside of the doomed bus in order to dismantle a bomb. When the cables securing the dolly break, Jack almost dies. Fortunately, he manages to save his life by embedding a knife into the bus's fuel tank, creating a makeshift grip for him to hold onto.

When Jack manages to scramble back into the bus's interior, he isn't given long to savor his success. As already discussed in the section on "Vanishing Allies," he discovers that the villain has killed Harry, Jack's best friend and partner (component #2).

Observe that this combination also makes effective use of contrast. The pain of Harry's death is more intense because it was immediately preceded by the emotional high of Jack's victory. (Note: for more tips on how to write an action movie which kicks butt, refer to Part IV of this book.)

In another prototypical example, the hero can be emotionally devastated in two different arenas of his life—such as friendship and love. For instance, in JERRY MAGUIRE, Jerry first becomes alienated from Rod, his friend and client (component #1), before Dorothy demands that they should go their separate ways (component #2).

Likewise, in WEDDING CRASHERS, John becomes alienated from Claire (component #1), before parting ways with his best friend, Jeremy (component #2). (There are other trough types at work here too, but we'll get to those in a second.)

You'll notice that both Jerry and John experience an extremely similar combination of troughs, losing both a friend and a love interest. However, despite this similarity, these troughs—and the emotional experiences audiences have as a result of them—are worlds apart.

If you've been skeptical about using the seven common trough types or about borrowing from the trough patterns found in other movies because you're afraid this will lead to a generic screenplay that's the same as everyone else's, I hope this comparison dispels your doubts.

You can "steal" story beats from other films, *provided that you've specifically adapted them to your own story world.*

Advanced Trough Technique #4: Create a Nexus

With this technique, multiple troughs unfold, like a series of falling dominoes, one right after the other. Unlike advanced trough technique #3, to create this nexus, each trough must be triggered by the one which immediately preceded it. In other words, there's a clear cause and effect relationship between each constituent trough type.

To illustrate, we can return to WEDDING CRASHERS, and focus solely on the troughs which transpire once John is unmasked to Claire. The first trough, the unmasking, causes Claire to become alienated from him (the second trough), which then results in John's banishment from the Cleary compound—the third trough in the sequence.

A clever and highly entertaining example of this technique can also be found in THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL. This dizzying sequence begins when Will Turner becomes trapped below deck, which is rapidly filling up with sea water. Trying to save him, Elizabeth is taken hostage by Captain Barbosa's crew—initiating the second trough in the series.

To save Elizabeth (and incidentally Jack Sparrow), Will trades his life for theirs, resulting in his own captivity and the third trough. Despite Will's sacrifice, Elizabeth and Jack are free from peril for but a second. Since Will didn't specify the terms of the hostages' release, Captain Barbosa consequently banishes them to a deserted island, triggering the fourth trough of the set.

Advanced Trough Technique #5: Divide and Conquer

In this technique, you take your team of heroes, and split them up into various configurations, each of which faces their own distinctive obstacles.

STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE is probably the gold standard of this technique, utilizing it so effectively that the entire latter half of the second act is comprised of one hellacious trough sequence after another.

To fully understand this example, it's helpful to review the individual members of the team (especially if you're not familiar with the Star Wars universe). They are, in no particular order:

- Luke Skywalker: an orphan training to be a Jedi knight, who possesses a passion for justice which is matched by his impatience to prove himself
- Obi-Wan Kenobi: a great Jedi knight who's also Luke's mentor
- Princess Leia: a courageous aristocrat who wants to free the galaxy from tyranny
- Han Solo: a mercenary pilot who's always looking out for himself
- Chewbacca: a Wookiee (a large furry creature) and Solo's co-pilot; also known as "Chewie"
- C3P0: a rather pretentious golden android who knows multiple languages
- R2-D2: a simpler android who speaks in blips and beeps

Now that you've gotten acquainted (or reacquainted) with this team of rebels, let's see how writer and director George Lucas interweaves different configurations of them to create an engrossing story which has thrilled multiple generations of audiences.

We'll start with the capture of Solo's starship, the *Millennium Falcon*, by a space station belonging to the evil Imperial forces headed by Darth Vader:

Configuration #1: Everyone (except for Princess Leia) hides in smuggling compartments concealed within the *Falcon's* floor.

Having been captured by Darth Vader earlier on, Leia has been on the space station this whole time. At the moment, she's being kept on a detention block on the fifth level.

Configuration #2: Intent on disabling the tractor beams holding the *Falcon* in place, Obi-Wan ventures off on his own. As he tells Luke, "Your destiny lies along a different path from mine."

Configuration #3: Once Luke discovers Leia's onboard the space station, he doesn't stay put as Obi-Wan had instructed. Preying on Solo's mercenary instincts, Luke convinces Solo to rescue Leia. He, Solo, and Chewie march off to the detention center, while the androids are left on their own.

Configuration #4: Luke breaks Leia out of her prison cell. Meanwhile, Solo and Chewie keep lookout at the detention block's control center.

Configuration #5: When a squad of Imperial Stormtroopers checks up on the detention center, Luke, now with Leia, rejoins Solo and Chewie.

After their only exit is blocked off, they escape the cell bay via a garbage chute. Luke's almost swallowed by some unseen creature, and the group as a whole, barely avoids being compacted into trash.

Configuration #6: En route to the hangar where the *Falcon* is being kept, the group is attacked by another posse of stormtroopers. Solo and Chewie charge after the troopers, while Luke and Leia run in the opposite direction.

Luke and Leia must battle troopers of their own as they try to cross a bridge with a huge break in the middle.

Configuration #7: Having disabled the tractor beams restricting the *Falcon's* movements, Obi-Wan now duels Darth Vader.

Configuration #8: Luke and Leia reunite with Solo and Chewie. They, along with the droids, rush towards the *Falcon*. Before they board the ship, they witness Vader slay Obi-Wan.

But Obi-Wan sacrificed himself on purpose to enable the others to safely escape, and his ploy, fortunately is successful.

Can you see how George Lucas was able to multiply the entertainment value of his story by dividing up the heroes? It would've been far less entertaining to keep the group together.

If the group hadn't been split up, audiences would've pretty much watched the heroes battle the *same* set of obstacles. That's precisely why dividing a group is so powerful. It naturally leads to variety, which is, after all, the spice of life.

If you want to use this technique to spice up *your* story and achieve galactic screenwriting dominion, make sure you choose an appropriate setting. Because the Imperial space station was large, it had multiple locations with which the various configurations of heroes could interact.

Also keep in mind that to make the most out of this technique, it's a good idea to intercut between each of the hero configurations. Don't stay with one of them until that situation gets resolved. Instead, amplify audience suspense, and bounce back and forth between them.

Finally, to employ this tactic, it's imperative that your story has a large cast. Otherwise, you can't really split them up into multiple configurations. On that note, don't just focus on creative ways to split up your group.

Get creative about the formation of the group too. While STAR WARS was ingenious with regards to the way it brought each of its heroes together, to illustrate this point, we're going to move onto another franchise—MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE.

In GHOST PROTOCOL, creative approaches (which also fulfilled genre requirements) were used to form the final spy unit of Ethan, Jane, Benji, and Brandt. When the story begins, Jane and Benji break Ethan out of prison. Later, Brandt is welcomed to the fold out of necessity. After his boss is shot right in front of his (and Ethan's) eyes, there's nowhere else left for Brandt to go.

Advanced Trough Technique #6: Mix and Match

Requiring immense amounts of skill and creativity to execute well, this technique involves combining multiple trough types as well as the other advanced trough techniques into one elaborate sequence which may take up a good proportion of the second act's latter half.

One of the most outstanding examples of mixing and matching can be found in HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN. To fully understand how ingenious it is, it's helpful to first review the individual events which comprise the trough of hell:

- 1) A mystical creature known as a hippogriff is executed.
- 2) Harry and Hermione chase after Ron—and end up getting pummeled by the branches of the Whomping Willow, which eventually sends them into a secret passage underneath its roots.
- 3) The secret passage leads to the Shrieking Shack. There, Harry discovers that the instructor he has trusted, Professor Lupin, is really a werewolf.

If that weren't bad enough, Professor Lupin has been aiding and abetting Harry's godfather, Sirius Black, whom everyone believes betrayed Harry's parents to the villain.

For a brief moment, it looks like both Sirius and Lupin are going to kill Harry.

- 4) But that's actually a bit of misdirection. Sirius and Lupin have no intention of harming Harry. In truth, Sirius didn't betray Harry's parents.

That dubious distinction belongs to Peter Pettigrew. Presumed dead, he's actually been living—in transfigured form—as the Weasley family pet rat for the last twelve years.

- 5) Harry resolves to turn over Pettigrew to dementors, scary prison guards from Azkaban. Having taken Pettigrew into custody, everyone exits the Shrieking Shack.

Outside, in the forest, Sirius asks Harry to live with him, a magical offer which would remove Harry from the care of his cruel guardians.

But, in the sky hangs a full moon. It causes Professor Lupin to transform from a trusted friend into a vicious werewolf. He attacks Sirius, who tries to defend everyone against the werewolf's menace.

6) Having been distracted by a fellow werewolf's cry, Lupin runs off. The dementors searching for Sirius Black descend upon his injured body—and are about to kill him—when Harry miraculously stops them.

7) In the midst of all of the confusion, Pettigrew—the only one who can prove Sirius's innocence—has disappeared. As a result, Sirius is taken captive, and as punishment, will have his soul sucked out of him by the dementors.

Whew! That's a lot of developments to digest. (If you're not familiar with the Harry Potter franchise, then you may want to re-read the list again before moving on.)

As a side note, if you're a Harry Potter fan, you may've noticed that Severus Snape is conspicuously absent from my list of story events. Rest assured, I omitted him purely for the sake of simplicity.

With the knowledge you've gleaned so far from this screenwriting guide, can you identify the different techniques used in combination to craft this oh-so-elaborate trough? If you can't, that's okay. We're going to break it down, component by component, right now.

Component #1: Multiple Variations of the Vanishing Ally

This trough of hell sequence is filled with vanishing allies (trough type #6) who disappear in an assortment of variations: capture (Sirius Black); transformation from friend into foe (both Lupin and Pettigrew); and death (the hippogriff).

Okay, for the last one, you have to stretch the definition of an ally a little, but the death of the hippogriff certainly has emotional resonance. Out of all of them, however, it's Sirius's capture which is the most devastating to Harry, and the one with the most emotional impact.

Component #2: Two Sets of Pain Duos

This trough makes double (!) use of advanced trough technique #3, specifically by combining an action sequence which culminates in the hero's emotional turmoil.

Harry and Hermione's sound thumping by the Whomping Willow is the first action sequence. It ends with Harry learning the truth about the night of his parents' death. The werewolf attack comprises the second action sequence, and it ends with Sirius's near-death and eventual capture.

Notice that the scene inside the Shrieking Shack is quite calm in comparison to the action sequences which precede and follow it. Without this respite, audiences could get wearied by all of the action, and the sequences would bore rather than entertain. (We'll examine this idea more in depth in the "Thrillers and Action Movies" section in Part IV of this book.)

At the same time, although staid, the scene provides its own set of thrills, delighting audiences with one surprise reveal after another...which brings me to:

Component #3: A Nexus of Revelations

The scene in the Shrieking Shack is filled with a cluster of revelations, the majority of which are triggered by the one which preceded it. We learn that Professor Lupin is helping Sirius enter the school grounds (revelation #1) because Sirius didn't, as everyone believes, betray Harry's parents to the villain (revelation #2).

The real culprit is Peter Pettigrew (revelation #3) who isn't, as everyone assumes, dead (revelation #4). In fact, disguised as a pet rat, he has taken up residence with the Weasley family (revelation #5).

Notice that these revelations basically center on the night Harry's parents died, an event which occurred long before this story—and the two which preceded it—even begin. To put it another way, this nexus of revelations was devised by exploiting the hero's backstory to maximum degree.

Should you also wish to make use of this technique, keep in mind that the real key isn't to create a backstory filled with intriguing and startling details. The real key is knowing *when to reveal those details to the audience*.

Component #4: An Infusion of Dividing and Conquering

Although *THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN* doesn't make use of dividing and conquering as extensively as *A NEW HOPE*, this advanced trough technique still plays a meaningful role in the film's complex trough of hell. To see how, let's examine its essential constituent configurations.

If we consider the original band of heroes to consist of Harry, Hermione, and Ron, then the first configuration occurs when Ron, in pursuit of his pet rat, splits off from the trio.

Notice that this development gives Harry and Hermione a clear "mini-goal" with clearly defined stakes—Ron's safety. It also prevents the action sequence with the Whomping Willow from becoming too repetitive. Watching the aggressive tree assault Harry and Hermione was enjoyable; watching it assault Harry, Hermione, *and* Ron could've quickly become boring.

After many revelations are made about the night Harry's parents died, the original trio of heroes emerges from the tree. But now, their numbers have swollen to include Lupin and Sirius. This group isn't split apart geographically. However, it is split in regards to audience focus.

As the other characters recede in the background, the story spotlight brightly shines on Sirius and Harry. This choice is important because the content of Sirius's conversation with Harry (as previously discussed) heightens the emotional intensity of events soon to follow.

When Lupin transforms into a werewolf, the band of heroes diminishes by one. To protect those who remain, Sirius fights the werewolf on his own. This choice, too, is significant. For most of the movie, Sirius has been painted as a villain. By defending those whom he loves, Sirius demonstrates he has the heart of a hero, which also adds to the emotional impact of his forthcoming capture.

When Sirius and the werewolf venture deeper into the forest, Harry chases after them. Eventually, in a powerful display of magic, Harry will stave off the pack of dementors eager to suck up Sirius's soul.

Interestingly, during the film's climax, this configuration is altered slightly as Harry is joined by Hermione. This change-up doesn't significantly alter the encounter with the dementors, but it does elongate the werewolf attack sequence.

Component #5: A Wee Bit of Misdirection

If all of the other techniques weren't enough, this trough also makes use of advanced technique #2, purposeful misdirection. Because of the way the scene unfolds inside of the Shrieking Shack, for a while, audiences are deceived into thinking that Lupin and Sirius are going to gang up on Harry and kill him.

The deception doesn't last long, and audiences soon discover the truth. But even though the misdirection is only used briefly, it gives the scene an extra edge of intensity.

Note: throughout the film, Sirius has been painted as Harry's foe. Since, in actuality, he's Harry's friend, this example of misdirection is, technically, employed in conjunction with a reversal of the bait and switch vanishing ally trough type.

As you can see, mixing and matching (along with dividing and conquering) are very powerful techniques which tend to delight audiences with their complexity. However, it's important to remember that the best trough for your screenplay might involve something far simpler.

For example, the trough sequences in *NOTTING HILL* only involve two characters, Will and Anna. And for that particular story, which focused on the intimacy between human hearts, the lack of elaborateness was absolutely perfect.

To sum it up, before you attempt to use the flexibility of the advanced trough techniques to your advantage, make sure that your creative investment is warranted!

Part III: The Aftermath

After the trough of hell, most heroes are temporarily taken out for the count. They need time (not too much mind you) to recuperate, to regroup, and to reassess.

How do you show your hero's post-trough distress? And how does your sidelined hero get back into the game? Answering these two questions is the focus of this chapter.

5 Ways to Show (Rather than Tell) Your Hero's in Distress

Communicating that your hero has been physically injured is fairly easy, even if the damage itself is invisible (as would be the case with poisoning). His expression wanes, he can writhe in agony. He can apply an icepack to a swollen jaw or wrap a tourniquet around a gushing wound.

It's much more difficult to depict pain of the emotional, psychological, and psychic variety. Unlike a novel, you can't share your hero's anguished thoughts with the audience. Well, you could via voiceover, but in the majority of cases, you're limited to what can be seen or heard on-screen.

Your hero could certainly state his pain to the audience: "I feel awful," "I am riddled with guilt," "I am consumed by regret," and other lines of this ilk.

But this kind of "on the nose" dialogue reeks of heavy-handedness, and turns an emotionally-charged moment into dull drivel. Infusing the dialogue with sarcasm would be an improvement; infusing it with subtext even more so.

However, if you are not a dialogue maestro, you may find it much easier (and perhaps more effective) to reveal your hero's pain via images or action.

Below are five ways to demonstrate your hero's in distress—without resorting to the cliché of tears:

Distress Depiction Method #1: The Montage

According to Dave Trottier's *Screenwriter's Bible*, a montage "is a sequence of brief shots expressing the same or similar idea, which is generally scored to music in a script."

Unless you own the rights to it, it's good form **not** to name the song you'd like to accompany your montage. Leave it to the music supervisor to duke out licensing rights with the music studios.

For our purposes, the images comprising your montage would be used to express your hero's post-trough distress. Although they're not exclusive to comedies and romantic comedies, the montage is most frequently employed after the hero's trough of hell in these genres. You'll find a post-trough montage in movies with such diverse comedic tones as *HITCH*, *THE BREAK-UP*, and *JERRY MAGUIRE*.

And therein lies one of the biggest drawbacks of using this screenwriting technique. It's easy for writers (especially beginners) to rely on a melancholy tune to convey the hero's mood instead of putting their full effort into crafting a compelling, unique montage. The end result is an insipid string of mediocre images.

In this respect (and, incidentally, many others), take inspiration from *JERRY MAGUIRE*. Its break-up montage didn't solely rely on a haunting melody to convey Jerry's distress. During it, Jerry converses with the infamous goldfish he stole from his former employer. This callback to the beginning of the film added a creative flourish to the standard montage.

If you can use the montage as a tool, rather than as a crutch, then it can be a trusty, solid way to communicate your hero's distress. Otherwise, you might want to explore other options.

Distress Depiction Method #2: One Image

More is not always better. You don't need a three-minute long montage to show your hero's emotional devastation. Selecting one image can be just as—if not more—effective. As Meryl Streep muses in a featurette about *THE BRIDGES*

OF MADISON COUNTY, “In the end, the thing people most remember is a visual thing.”

After describing a few iconic images from the film, she continues, “And I think it has to do with the fact that people don’t like to be told what to feel in a movie. They like to have it ambush them, and feel it...and tell the story themselves. They can only do that when there’s no talking.”

Meryl Streep isn’t just waxing about the power of visuals to be poetic. They really are that potent. If you recall, Cady’s status as a social outcast in *MEAN GIRLS* was shown through an image of her eating her lunch alone in a bathroom stall. It may be trite to say, but that image does tell a thousand words.

This image also has extra power because it’s a callback to the film’s beginning, specifically Cady’s first day of school. On that day, she was invisible, but after her trough of hell, things are far worse, because now, she’s hated. It’s interesting that by repeating the same image, the movie showed exactly how much Cady’s life had changed for the worse.

In your own screenplay, you could start out by including a post-trough montage to show your hero’s distress. But after you complete it, you may pull the most emotionally evocative image from the list and jettison the rest.

To take this technique to the next level, you can, like *MEAN GIRLS*, echo an image previously used in your script. You can also use an image which depicts the destruction of an object which symbolizes what the hero has lost.

Distress Depiction Method #3: Repetitive Action

Engaging in repetitive action is a hallmark of a mind at unease, making it a powerful way to externally show your hero’s internal turmoil.

For example, in *TRAFFIC*, during Robert Wakefield’s trough of hell, his drug-addicted daughter flees group therapy and never returns home. To depict his ensuing agony, the movie doesn’t rely on dialogue, but action. Desperate to find her, he repeatedly cruises his Mercedes through a neighborhood much seedier than the ones to which he’s accustomed.

Returning to Dr Bailey’s turmoil in the ninth season of *GREY’S ANATOMY* provides us with yet another dramatic example. After realizing she was, albeit indirectly, responsible for killing three of her patients, the good surgeon sequesters herself within a small laboratory and uses her self-imposed isolation to conduct a series of medical tests. Again and again—and again—she tests herself for staph.

But each time, the results are the same as they were before: negative.

I don’t think that any line of dialogue, no matter how well-crafted, could communicate Dr Bailey’s mental anguish so poignantly. During one point in the sequence, the screen is filled with rows upon rows of agar plates, all marked negative. Powerful and haunting, this image illustrates how well this method of distress depiction works in tandem with method #2.

Showing your hero’s turmoil via repetition isn’t limited to dramas. It can work for comedies too. *WHEN HARRY MET SALLY* is an excellent example. A nanosecond of being lovers ruins Harry and Sally’s once solid friendship. The movie shows Harry’s ensuing misery through a string of increasingly desperate (and humorous) phone calls. First he calls her to remind her, “It’s holiday season, the season of charity and forgiveness. And although it’s not widely known, it is also the season of groveling.”

The next time, his voicemail contains a multiple choice quiz. Each option consists of a reason why Sally isn’t returning his calls, like C, where she’s home, and desperately wants to talk to him, but unfortunately is “trapped under something heavy.”

The third time, his message is a song. Lyrical highlights include: “If you’re feeling sad and lonely, there’s a service I can render. Tell the one who digs you only, I can be so warm and tender. Call me. Maybe it’s late to just call me, but don’t be afraid to just phone *moi!*” Phone call scenes usually drag down your story’s momentum, but in this case, they effectively communicated Harry’s pain, while simultaneously fulfilling genre requirements.

Distress Depiction Method #4: Heroes Behaving Badly

Another way to show your hero’s distress is to have him engaged in behavior which either contradicts societal

conventions or goes against his character. In the case of the former, you don't have to do any setup as long as the values of your audience match the social mores of your story world.

In the case of the latter, you do need to establish some groundwork beforehand so that the audience realizes that your hero is, in fact, behaving abnormally. To illustrate the point, let's look at some examples.

In *WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS*, Joy has spent approximately 50% of the film in pursuit of a slot machine jackpot. But after she's been betrayed by Jack, she doesn't want a single penny of the money. She just wants a divorce. By having Joy reject the millions—an action which contravenes all of her preceding behavior—the movie clearly conveys her emotional distress.

As previously mentioned, Robert Wakefield obsessively searches for his runaway daughter in *TRAFFIC*. But that's not the only way the Oscar-winning film reveals his inner anguish. When he returns home after searching the streets, he cuddles his heartbroken wife. That may seem a perfectly normal gesture to you, but within the context of this movie, it's quite abnormal.

Tension, which had already run deep between the two spouses, heightened as each accused the other of being responsible for their daughter's demise. But this scene signaled a shift from blame to comfort. Under ordinary circumstances, Robert and his wife would not seek solace from each other, and this aberrant behavior—in this case, Robert Wakefield behaving well—indicates just how emotionally ravaged the couple is.

You've probably witnessed friends and family members lashing out when they're frustrated or experiencing some other form of psychological distress. Movie heroes can lash out too, but this behavior makes a stronger statement when it's atypical of your hero.

Going back to JJ Abrams's *STAR TREK* reboot, after his mother's death, Spock tries to stay true to his Vulcan heritage and suppresses his feelings. He is calm, controlled, rationale.

That is, until Kirk taunts Spock. "What is it with you, Spock? Your planet was just destroyed, your mother murdered, and you're not even upset...What is it like not to feel anger? Or heartbreak? Or the need to stop at nothing to avenge the death of the woman who gave birth to you?"

Powerful questions, indeed, but Kirk's not finished with his inquisition just yet. "You feel nothing. It must not even compute for you! You never loved her."

In response, Spock abandons his Vulcan identity, succumbs to the emotions swirling within him, and throttles Kirk. Those emotions have to be extremely turbulent for Spock, of all people, to lose control like that.

This was actually Kirk's endgame all along: to have Spock admit he was emotionally compromised so that he would cede control of the *Starship Enterprise* to Kirk. Thus, Spock's display of emotion not only reveals his distress but also pushes the plot forward—a great example of using one scene to accomplish more than one storytelling objective.

Trough type #4, banishment, can also achieve double duty, functioning not just as a trough but also as a method of depicting your hero's distress. When a proactive protagonist suddenly goes into self-imposed exile, his withdrawal is a clear sign that he's in pain.

For example, in *TOP GUN*, audiences know how extensively Maverick's been derailed by Goose's death because (a) he uncharacteristically doesn't engage during aerial combat exercises and (b) he withdraws from the training program he was so enthused to participate in.

Distress Depiction Method #5: Other Characters' Reactions

You don't have to shine a spotlight on your hero to show his emotional and/or psychological distress. Instead, you can portray he's in pain by highlighting *other characters'* reactions to him.

For example, one of your hero's colleagues could exhibit extreme impatience. However, after your hero's trough of hell, this prickly person could transform into a model of solicitousness. For this personality change to take place, audiences would naturally conclude that your hero has to be in a bad way.

A great example of this can be found in *SHERLOCK HOLMES*. Jealous of Watson's fiancée, Holmes has been nothing

but rude and cavalier to Mary Morstan, even going so far as to insinuate she's a gold digger. When Watson and he are both thrown into the clink, she bails out Watson, leaving Holmes behind.

But once Watson is seriously injured, Mary changes her tune and tries to assuage Holmes's guilt. "This was not your responsibility," she says. "It was his choice. He'd say that it was worth the wounds." For Holmes to elicit such compassion from Mary, someone who has every reason to despise him, then he must be in dire straits indeed.

Having other characters gossip about your hero's emotional state is another option to explore. This exchange doesn't have to be lengthy either. A few lines will do.

For instance, during the trough of hell in *10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU*, the heroine, Kat Stratford, discovers that the boy she's dating was paid to take her out. Immediately thereafter, we see her, relaxing on her porch, sketching. It seems like it's just business as usual for the feisty teen.

Then when Kat's sister, Bianca, is picked up by her new boyfriend, he asks Bianca if Kat is going to be okay. Bianca replies, "I sure hope so." This exchange, although brief, tells us that there's more going on than meets the eye. (Later on, we'll feel the full force of Kat's emotional upheaval, as she tearfully recites her poem, "10 Things I Hate About You," to her English class.)

One of my favorite examples of using another character to illustrate your hero's sorrowful plight is from *THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT*. One of the president's advisors, Lewis, is often pushy and, like *STAR TREK*'s Spock, always in control.

But when the president's approval ratings continue to spiral downwards, Lewis goes into meltdown mode, throwing a temper tantrum while on the phone with recalcitrant congressman. For Lewis to lose his cool like that, the audience can draw but one conclusion: the president must be in big trouble.

In addition to your hero's teammates, you can use this technique with your villain's henchmen. At your climax, you can show them, like Lewis, going into meltdown mode, which helps reinforce the might of your hero. If he weren't someone to reckon with, the villain's minions wouldn't be so afraid.

At the same time, your villain, in contrast to his underlings, would remain stoic, reinforcing the idea that he's also a powerful force to contend with. This way, at your climax, your hero and villain will come across as well-matched, which makes their final confrontation much more enjoyable for audiences to watch.

Subtlety Isn't a Sin

When you're reflecting on ways to show your hero's distress, don't be afraid of subtlety. Give the audience enough credit. If you've established the hero's emotional fabric, and then rent that fabric in two, audiences will draw all the right connections.

Even if you don't extensively show your hero's pain, they will feel it—especially if they've invested in your hero and/or if you've made use of the emotional amplification techniques (demonstrating the value, delineating the contrast, and depicting the aggregate) discussed earlier in this book.

Going back to *IRON MAN*, as Tony lies on the floor of his office, writhing in pain, he could've reflected on the loss of his legacy. To show this line of thought, after Obadiah announced his future plans, the movie could've employed a quick montage: images of weapons maiming children, a close-up of Tony's name on a missile, a flashback to the reporter accusing Tony of being a merchant of death, and another flashback to the press conference where Tony vowed to take Stark Industries in a new direction.

But a montage like that, coupled with the beats of the trough itself, would've been emotional overkill. It also would've been unnecessary. At that moment, images in that vein would start to come to the forefront of audiences' consciousness anyway, and they would feel Tony's psychic distress, even though it wasn't explicitly articulated.

As you develop your screenwriting skills, you'll get better and better at achieving the perfect amount of pathos during—and after—your hero's trough of hell. Between the two, spend more energy crafting the trough of hell itself rather than on generating ways to show your hero's ensuing distress.

Remember, you want to pluck at your audiences' heartstrings, not tug at them with a crowbar.

The Post-Trough Realization

Happily, in the majority of stories, the pain the hero incurs during his trough of hell contains a silver lining. Without being brought to the edge of this painful precipice, the hero would never gain the insight he needs in order to achieve complete victory.

In other words, the “elixir” of understanding cannot be earned without enduring the crucible of the trough.

This critical insight, or realization, will force the hero to reevaluate the import of information he’s previously gathered, to mobilize the resources he’s accumulated, and/or to plan the strategy of his final attack.

Without it, the hero would still be licking his wounds, or even worse, going into the final battle with the wrong set of supplies. In practice, gaining this personal insight can be boiled down to two components: the vehicle of delivery (the messenger) and the contents of the realization (the message).

The Messenger

In *MEAN GIRLS*, there’s a brief scene where Mrs Norbury draws from her personal life to dispense—unwanted—advice to Cady. “The only guy that ever calls my house is Randy from Chase Visa,” she confesses, in an outpouring of TMI. “And you know why? Because I’m a pusher. I push people. I pushed my husband into law school. That was a bust. I pushed myself into working three jobs. And now, I’m gonna push you because I know you’re smarter than this.”

In the teen comedy, Mrs Norbury’s description of a “pusher” eventually leads to accusations that she’s a drug dealer. For us, it’s much more beneficial, containing the perfect definition for the messenger who galvanizes, or “pushes,” your hero into action after his trough.

In a prototypical example, the messenger will give the hero a motivational pep talk, one which the hero would’ve most likely disregarded before his trough of hell. But after his major defeat, he’s usually far more receptive to listening to the messenger. What else can he do?

That’s the prototypical version. In practice, this story beat will play out in a variety of ways, but the end result is always the same: the hero gets back into the game.

For instance, in *THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT*, A.J., the president’s best friend and chief of staff, encourages the troubled leader to go after a silver-tongued senator and “fight the fights that need fighting.” President Shepherd doesn’t respond well to this criticism and accuses A.J. of giving advice “from the cheap seats” of a spectator.

Regretting his angry outburst, Shepherd then reflectively asks if they had to go through a character debate three years ago, “would we have won?” A.J. doesn’t know, but he would’ve liked that campaign. “If my friend Andy Shepherd showed up, I would’ve liked it very much.” That quiet admission motivates Shepherd to change his strategy and finally engage in the character debate he had been steadfastly avoiding.

KUNG FU PANDA is another great example. To his adopted father’s dismay, Po is more interested in kung fu than in noodle soup sales. Having gone through numerous trials and having won the grudging respect of his mentor, the chubby panda bear obtains the coveted Dragon Scroll.

But when he discovers the scroll is blank, Po questions his selection as the country’s Dragon Warrior. Dispirited and filled with self-doubt, Po abandons kung fu and resigns himself to his fate as a soup vendor.

Po’s dad views this as a perfect opportunity to reveal to his son the secret ingredient in his special noodle soup. “The secret ingredient is nothing,” he whispers, as if revealing a matter of national security. “There is no secret ingredient...to make something special, you just have to *believe* it’s special.”

Because of this revelation, Po realizes the truth behind the blank canvas of the Dragon Scroll. To be the Dragon Warrior, you just have to believe you are the Dragon Warrior. Inspired once more, Po then reclaims his identity as the Warrior and re-engages in his goal to defeat the villainous snow leopard who threatens everything he holds dear. (Curiously, this realization mirrors that of Neo’s in *THE MATRIX*. Just switch Po with Neo, the Dragon Scroll with The Oracle, and the Dragon Warrior with The One.)

In *FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL*, the messenger comes in the form of Tommy, the seventh richest man in England, and the most socially inept of Charles's eclectic group of mates. After one of these mates dies suddenly, Charles muses on death and love, finally concluding that marriage is pointless unless you've found your perfect match.

Tommy disagrees. (Mildly of course.) "The truth is, unlike you, I never expected the thunderbolt. I'd always hoped that I'd meet some nice, friendly girl, like the look of her, hope the look of me didn't make her physically sick, and then pop the question, and uhm, settle down. Be happy. It worked for my parents." Tommy shrugs. "Apart from the divorce and all that."

Charles seems swayed by Tommy's point of view. "Maybe you're right," Charles says with calm resignation. "Maybe waiting for all this one true love stuff gets you nowhere."

Usually, the hero leaves the post-trough pep talk inspired, rather than resigned. Usually, the messenger encourages the hero to pursue his heart's desire, not to settle for second-best. By going against the grain, and steering the hero in the opposite direction, screenwriter Richard Curtis cleverly twists a standard romantic comedy beat into something fresh and different.

Likewise, *LEGALLY BLONDE* puts an interesting spin on the messenger trope. Professor Stromwell is a scary female instructor who ousted Elle from her class because Elle was unprepared. (It was the first day of school.)

As a matter of fact, Stromwell comes across as more of a foe than a friend (what John Truby would refer to as a fake-opponent ally). But appearances to the contrary, the stern professor is more supportive than she seems.

When she overhears Elle announcing her plans to drop out of Harvard Law, Stromwell encourages Elle to reconsider. "If you're going to let one stupid prick ruin your life, you're not the girl I thought you were." Because the professor asserts her confidence in Elle's intellectual abilities, Elle gains—or more accurately, regains—confidence in her intellectual abilities too, paving the way for a suitably sassy showdown in Act Three.

Sometimes, the messenger doesn't really give the hero a true pep talk, but their casual, offhand comment causes the hero to make the key realization on his own. In *BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY*, Bridget's mother unintentionally throws new light upon Mark Darcy's situation. "Poor Mark," she laments. "This is always a bad time of year for him. You know his Japanese wife left him on Christmas Day...she ran off with his best friend from Cambridge. Total scoundrel apparently. Best man at his wedding."

Having been fed lies by her ex-beau (the total scoundrel in question), Bridget suffered from the misapprehension that Darcy was a cheating lunatic. Realizing her mistake, she pursues the British dish with hilariously awkward enthusiasm.

In *THE HANGOVER*, Phil, Stu, and Alan unintentionally rescue the wrong Doug, "the worst drug dealer ever," from a Chinese gangster. Upon his release, the drug dealer idly muses on the etymology of the date-rape drug, roofies. "It's funny, because just the other day, me and my boy, we was wondering why they even call them roofies. Why not floories, right? Because when you take them, you're more likely to end up on the floor than the roof. What about groundies? That's a good new name for them."

From these idiotic ramblings, Stu solves the mystery of the missing groom: they left him on the roof of their hotel as a prank. After this flash of insight, the gang rescues the correct Doug and delivers him to his wedding on time.

Interestingly, in *MEAN GIRLS*, the messenger—a frumpy female mathlete from a rival school—doesn't actually say anything at all. As Cady squares off against the unattractive girl during the "sudden death" round of the state championships, Cady comes to an important realization all by her lonesome: "Miss Caroline Kraft seriously needed to pluck her eyebrows. Her outfit looked like it was picked by a blind Sunday school teacher. And she had some 99-cent lip gloss on her snaggletooth. And that's when I realized, making fun of Caroline Kraft wouldn't stop her from beating me in this contest. Calling somebody else fat won't make you any skinnier. Calling someone stupid doesn't make you any smarter. And ruining Regina George's life definitely didn't make me any happier. All you can do in life is to try to solve the problem in front of you."

So far, we've been mostly focusing on verbal "pushes." But in many cases, the hero isn't inspired to renew pursuit of his goal because of the messenger's words but because of the messenger's actions.

JERRY MAGUIRE is one of my favorite examples of this. Throughout the film, Jerry's had a contentious relationship with his one and only client, Rod Tidwell. At the film's end, having followed Jerry's advice to play with his heart—

rather than his head—Rod’s star is on the rise.

However, during a critical playoff game, Rod is tackled aggressively. So much so, it seems that he’s been taken out of commission for good. Miraculously, Rod not only rises to his feet, he engages in a series of crowd-pleasing acrobatics.

After witnessing Rod’s astounding recovery, Jerry realizes that this whole experience is meaningless if he doesn’t have someone—his wife, Dorothy—to share it with.

Jerry’s realization emerges from observing an uplifting experience. Conversely, the hero can come to his post-trough realization by observing the messenger engaged in depressing activities. A prime example comes from WEDDING CRASHERS. John renews his pursuit of Claire only after crashing funerals with Chazz Reinhold, the original wedding crasher who’s now reached an all-time low. This development not only gives audiences a surprise cameo by Will Ferrell, it gives John insight into his own heart.

“I crashed a funeral earlier,” he confesses to all the guests who’ve congregated together to witness Jeremy’s wedding to Claire’s sister. “It wasn’t my idea...and I see this widow, and she’s a wreck. She’s just lost the person she loves most in this world. And I realized we’re all gonna lose the people we love. That’s the way it is. But,” he shakes his head, “not me. Not right now. Because the person I love the most is standing right here, and I’m not ready to lose you yet.”

It should be acknowledged that the hero’s message isn’t always delivered by a person per se. It can also be delivered through an object.

In THE SIXTH SENSE, the relevant object is a tape used to record therapy sessions with patients. Because of this tape, Malcolm not only realizes that the current patient he’s seeing is telling the truth (the young boy can see ghosts) but also that Malcolm’s former patient, the one who shot him, suffered from the same affliction. Notably, this realization pales in comparison to the one Malcolm has at the very end of the film.

In UP, the object is an adventure diary, filled with drawings made by the hero’s late wife. At the beginning of the third act, Carl pages through the book, as is his custom, and regretfully reminisces about all the adventures he and Ellie didn’t go on because everyday life got in the way.

But this time is different. Carl flips *past* the point where he normally stops—where he assumed his wife’s diary entries ended—and, for the first time, learns that she filled the diary with drawings of the blissful domestic life they shared. This discovery enables him to realize that their life together *was* an adventure. In this Pixar film, using the diary as a vehicle for Carl’s realization came across as sweet. In lesser hands, it could’ve come across as cheesy. If you plan to borrow this idea, consider yourself forewarned!

One more note of caution: one messenger is plenty. If your hero gets well-meaning advice from a surfeit of characters, it becomes a “too many cooks spoil the broth” situation.

Take TOP GUN. Maverick receives encouragement from the wife of his deceased best friend Goose, from his love interest, from his fiercest rival at the Navy’s Fighter Weapons School, and from a mentor who had flown with his late father.

All tell Maverick variations of the same message: you need to get back in the game. While each individual interaction results in a series of touching scenes, (in view of Goose’s death, his wife’s message is especially poignant), together, all of this well-meaning advice bogs down the story’s momentum and becomes tediously redundant.

The Message

Like Paul en route to Damascus, once the hero experiences his realization, scales fall from his eyes, enabling him to take concrete action.

Within specific genres, certain patterns emerge. In romantic comedies, the realization is often some variation of “I was a fool to let go of the person I love.” Pursuit of that loved one will then ensue. Examples of this can be found in movies like HITCH, THE PROPOSAL, PRETTY WOMAN, SOMETHING’S GOTTA GIVE, and WHEN HARRY MET SALLY.

Notice that in a prototypical romantic comedy, the action of the third act can’t really get going until the hero experiences this critical realization. Hence, it’s a wise decision to dispatch with this realization fairly early on, enabling the hero to

pursue his true love with gusto while providing audiences exactly what they came to see.

In action movies and thrillers, the hero often gleans new insight into the villain's strategy. He may discover the villain's true identity (BATMAN BEGINS), next target (COLLATERAL), next location of attack (SHERLOCK HOLMES), or a vulnerability within the villain's prized weapon (STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE).

In comedies and dramas (especially ones with a coming of age theme), the hero's realization frequently involves insight into his own character, a truth he was, for whatever reason, unwilling to admit or confront before.

In DIRTY DANCING, Baby learns that the world doesn't operate the way her daddy told her. In LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE, Dwayne realizes he can't let a little thing like colorblindness prevent him from flying. In LIAR LIAR, Fletcher acknowledges that he does, in fact, love his son.

Remember, these are just common patterns, not set-in-stone rules. A hero's realization can definitely take other, perhaps more interesting, forms. For example, in movies which employ misdirection (see: "Trough Type #3: Death" in Part II), the hero—and the audience—may realize that they were deceived earlier on.

The hero—and again the audience—may also learn the true nature of one of the other characters. One of the most powerful examples of this is the revelation which ends THE EMPIRE STRIKE BACK, in which we learn that Darth Vader is Luke's father.

Relationships between progeny and parents also form two key realizations in ROBIN HOOD: PRINCE OF THIEVES. Robin discovers that a contentious peasant is not an ordinary peasant but his half-brother. Meanwhile, the Sheriff of Nottingham discovers that a prophetic crone is no ordinary crone but his own mother.

Apart from the surprise factor, this duo of realizations is especially enjoyable for audiences to experience because both the hero *and* the villain gain insight into their genealogy. Furthermore, these revelations are mirror opposites of each other. The peasant transforms from foe to ally, while the crone transforms from ally to foe.

If you do employ this technique, invest as much energy in introducing the mercurial supporting character as you do in revealing his secret backstory. Like the bait and switch trough type, the more you cultivate a first impression which diverges from the character's true nature, the more you enhance the forthcoming surprise, creating a more satisfying experience for audiences.

Accustomed to viewing the hero and the supporting character in one light, when you throw back the curtain, audiences will be delighted to discover another context altogether. Think about how GHOST PROTOCOL first introduces Brandt. He seems like a "wet behind the ears" analyst. So it comes as quite a surprise when it's revealed he's actually an experienced field agent who has a startling connection to Ethan's past.

MISCELLANY

Below are an assortment of pointers and observations about the post-trough realization to keep in mind:

1) The hero can have more than one key realization. For instance, in THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA, Andy first discovers the plot to take down Miranda (realization #1) and then accepts that she is not cut from the same cloth as Miranda (realization #2).

2) The hero isn't the only person who can have a key realization (although his is often the most significant). For example, both Bogomil (BEVERLY HILLS COP) and Eric (MISS CONGENIALITY) realize they were wrong to doubt the hero.

In MRS DOUBTFIRE, Daniel Hillard's opponent, his ex-wife, realizes that she was wrong to separate Daniel from their three children.

3) Audiences particularly enjoy game-changing realizations which cause them to reevaluate everything they've just witnessed. (Think THE SIXTH SENSE, THE USUAL SUSPECTS, REBECCA and THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK). Explosive realizations like these are best deployed at the last possible minute.

It is more likely though that your screenplay will end with a less explosive realization, what I like to call a "capper realization." These often enable the audience to imagine a new story emerging from the one they have just watched.

One such example is from JERRY MAGUIRE. Jerry and Dorothy discover Ray has a talent for baseball. From that detail, audiences can imagine a subsequent story where Jerry is Ray's sports agent.

4) Frequently, the hero's post-trough realization correlates to the paradoxical nature of his trough of hell. For instance, the only way a hero might gain critical intel is by enduring the rigors of the trough. The only way the hero may realize he loves someone is by losing that person.

So if you're having difficulties deciding which trough type is the best one to end your second act, try working backwards.

What MUST your hero realize before he can engage in the climax? What is the most logical (and entertaining) way for him to glean this insight?

5) You'll notice that in many cases, the messenger is a supporting character whose existence is closely tied to the hero's through a subplot. So, if you're having difficulties incorporating subplots into your script, again, it can be helpful to work backwards.

Who is the best (and most interesting) person to deliver the message to the hero? How is this person integrated into the hero's life?

6) Realizations are certainly not mandatory, but they usually emerge as a natural outgrowth of character development, thematic expression, or prior setups.

At this point, if you're a three-act structure die-hard, you might wonder if the trough's aftermath constitutes the tail end of Act Two or the beginning of Act Three. It's your choice really. In contrast to the break between Acts One and Two, the break between Acts Two and Three is much softer.

Personally, I like to think of the aftermath as an interstitial bridge which spans both acts rather than a well-defined division between the two. However, choosing a definitive boundary is enormously helpful in assessing your screenplay's proportion and pacing, topics which will be addressed in the next chapter.

Part IV: Parameters and Guidelines

So far, we've focused on the broad strokes of the trough of hell story beat. But when it comes time to implement these screenwriting tips, there are some nuances to keep in mind. That's what we're going to do now.

Specifically, this chapter covers (a) when the trough of hell should occur, (b) how long the scene or sequence should last, (c) the relationship between the trough and pacing, and (d) problem spots unique to specific genres.

Timing

Whether the trough of hell in your screenplay is three or twelve pages long, it should conclude—or be on its way to concluding—three quarters of the way through your script.

There are some major exceptions to this, which we'll address a little later. But on the whole, the trough of hell should wrap up at the 75%-mark of your story.

You may be bristling at these statements. It may seem like I've replaced the magic of storytelling with mathematical calculations. But the truth is, math—in the form of symmetry and proportion—is at the root of much of the beauty which populates the natural world.

Likewise, beautiful stories are blessed with proportionate structure. And by “beautiful,” I don't mean that they are written with language so lofty it makes you weep, or that they have the lavish feel of a Merchant Ivory production, or that they touch upon the very marrow of the human condition.

Beautiful stories can be plain and simple. Because, to be beautiful, all a story must do is engage audiences from beginning to end.

No more, and no less.

In screenwriting circles, a fiery debate rages about the merits of three-act structure. Whether they are pro-three acts or con-, everyone seems to agree on one thing: stories have a beginning (setup), middle (conflict), and end (climax and resolution).

And when these individual components are proportionate to each other, the result is a beautiful, engaging story.

This is one of the main advantages of three-act structure. It makes it easier for screenwriters, especially beginners, to craft screenplays which are proportionate. The boundary of Act One prevents the beginning from dragging on for too long; the boundary of Act Two does the same for the middle. There's balance all around.

In practice, this usually means that Act Two is double the length of Acts One and Three. In a 100-page script, it would break down like this:

- Act One, 25 pages
- Act Two, 50 pages
- Act Three, 25 pages

Since the trough of hell sequence signals the end of Act Two, in a 100-page screenplay, it should wrap up around page 75. In a 110-page screenplay, it should wrap up around page 83. In a 120-page screenplay, it should wrap up around page 90.

As Hal Ackerman wisely observes in *Write Screenplays That Sell*, “the idea is not to impose a strict militaristic precision on it. The exact moment that the sun crosses the equator may be on 3:27 p.m. on March 21. But we feel Spring beginning when something in the air does something to our blood. And *usually* that happens around the 21st. Something happens in the blood of a screenplay, too, that defines the end of an act.”

Remember, this parameter isn't intended to limit you. It's there to help you write a story that has balance, so that the beginning doesn't overwhelm the middle, and the middle doesn't overwhelm the end. Oftentimes, when you sense that

something's amiss with your script, but you can't precisely articulate what it is, proportion (specifically its lack) is the culprit.

For screenwriters just starting out, the first act break is usually a problem spot. They tend to overload the beginning with too much background information and too many explanations. To make the first act more proportionate to the rest of the script, they either need to delay revealing this information, reveal it more subtly, or perhaps not reveal it at all. Fortunately, these skills can be acquired fairly quickly and easily.

The quagmire of the second act ending is trickier to navigate. At this point, many writers have run out of steam. They're tired, they're frustrated, they're desperate.

To prevent audience interest from flagging, they know that something meaningful has to happen at this part of their screenplay. But they're not sure what that something should entail. So they tack on scene after scene after scene to the trough, hoping that something will stick.

By the end of it, they'll have completed several pages. They will move onto the climax and resolution, happily believing they've slayed the dragon which lurks at the end of Act Two.

Because they've added so many scenes to the trough, *their screenplay will be the appropriate length, but its proportion is likely to be disjointed*. Specifically, the third act may only take up 15% of the script—or less.

In Blake Snyder's screenwriting guide, *Save the Cat*, he makes reference to a phenomenon he's dubbed "the eternally light Act Three." As he explains it, "in the early going, you almost always have a light Act Three. It's usually two cards. One labeled 'the Hero figures out what to do now' and the other labeled 'the Showdown.'"

Snyder promises that, in the end, the light Act Three will be filled with more ideas. After all, by FADE OUT, you have to pay off all the narrative debts you've accrued along the way.

This is where an overly long trough creates a problem. Well, technically, it masks the problem: *the third act is still light*.

The climax falls short, and doesn't truly do justice to the story. This, however, isn't readily apparent. The climax and resolution look like they're the right length because the completed screenplay is the right length. But the screenplay itself is the right length only because the second half of Act Two encroached upon Act Three—not because the grand finale accomplished its storytelling duty.

In short, the middle has overwhelmed the ending, undercutting it, instead of enhancing it. The end result? The script doesn't read well, and worst of all, the screenwriter doesn't know why, nor how to salvage it.

When you feel that something's "off" about your screenplay, take a closer look at its proportions. Maybe, the ending needs to be extended while the middle—or the beginning or both—needs to be scaled back. Maybe, it's time to get a little more mathematical.

So far, we've been focusing on troughs which end too late. Sometimes, troughs end too early. This is less common, but it's a problem all the same.

To see why, let's examine OUT OF SIGHT. George Clooney plays Jack Foley, a con man who, at the film's beginning, manages to rob a bank solely by using the power of insinuation. Unfortunately, car troubles preclude a quick getaway, and he's caught and sent to prison.

When he's released, Foley tries to secure honest work. To this end, he seeks out Dick Ripley, a wealthy white collar criminal whom Foley protected from more hardcore inmates when they did time together at a federal penitentiary.

But the job Ripley offers—security detail—isn't exactly what Foley expected. From Foley's point of view, it's a massive insult, a cut to his very identity. Interestingly, this scene is the trigger which causes Foley to rob the bank at the movie's beginning.

So why did director Steven Soderbergh not begin with it?

That's a good question, which Soderbergh answers in the behind-the-scenes featurette, INSIDE OUT OF SIGHT. "I knew a scene like Jack going to see Ripley in his office about the job has more impact 90 minutes into the film than it

would have 9 minutes into the film. He'd have nothing invested, and so the scene wouldn't have any weight."

The same principle applies to the hero's trough of hell. The more time audiences spend with the hero, the more attached they get. The more invested and involved they become. So a trough which occurs too early is going to have less emotional impact than one which occurs later on because audiences have had less time to engage with the hero.

In other words, *the same incident is going to have a different effect, simply by virtue of its placement in your story*. That, in a nutshell, is why structure matters. The order of your story events is equally as important as the content of the events themselves.

As I mentioned earlier, there are some major exceptions to the 75% rule (are you surprised?), which we'll tackle now:

ROMANTIC COMEDIES

In romantic comedies, the second act tends to end far later than in other genres. In *THE PROPOSAL*, the second act ends approximately 87% of the way into the movie, leaving only 13 minutes for the third act (and end credits). In *PRETTY WOMAN*, the third act is swiftly concluded within 8 minutes, taking up less than 7% of the film.

Although such truncated third acts typically create disproportionate scripts, in this genre, no one seems to mind. Both *THE PROPOSAL* and *PRETTY WOMAN* were bona fide box office hits which raked in millions of dollars worldwide.

But just because several successful romantic comedies have traditionally light third acts, it doesn't mean yours should.

Perhaps, the final confrontation between the hero and heroine doesn't need to be lengthy to satiate audiences. (Indeed, the climax and resolution of *10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU* take place within 6 sparse minutes, and yet, the ending feels just right.)

On the other hand, perhaps you've just taken the most straightforward, convenient approach. Perhaps, you settled.

Perhaps, you got lazy.

If the third act of your romantic comedy is truncated, at least try to add another complication to it. For instance, make it more difficult for the hero to beg forgiveness from the heroine (or vice versa) in the first place, like in *NOTTING HILL*.

This will lengthen the third act, improving its proportion with respect to the beginning and middle. (It may also make your screenplay too long, in which case, first try scaling back the second act rather than trimming down the third.)

If you take a more imaginative approach, adding more twists to the climax, and more payoffs to the resolution, your screenplay should multiply its ability to engage audiences. It will also stand out from the hundreds of other rom-coms floating around Hollywood which were content to follow the genre's tradition of eternally light third acts. (Note: more tips on writing romantic comedies can be found in the "Genre" section of this chapter.)

SECOND ACT SUBPLOT INTRUSION

If a subplot dominates the latter part of your second act, the hero's "all is lost" moment may take place earlier on than three quarters of the way through the story. *CRAZY STUPID LOVE* is a great example of this. When Cal Weaver's wife wants a divorce, he's unexpectedly tossed back into the dating scene. Lost and flustered, he seeks advice from a young Lothario named Jacob.

Eventually, Cal's wife discovers Cal had a one-night stand with his son's teacher, a discovery which completely derails Cal's plan to win her back. This takes place approximately 55% of the way into the movie.

Despite the early appearance of the hero's trough, the story still maintains balance. It accomplishes this in large part by switching gears, focusing more on Jacob's love life during the latter half of the second act than on Cal's. This structural choice enables the third act (which notably has two climax sequences) to begin—right on schedule—at the movie's three quarter mark.

If you're writing a love triangle type of story, this pattern makes for a great template. The heroine could make an unpleasant discovery about suitor A halfway through your screenplay, initiating their alienation and leaving her to pursue a relationship with suitor B.

Your script would then focus on that relationship, until it too, hits the skids, initiating a second trough sequence which would segue into the third act. (If you want to see this template in action, rent BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY.)

EXTENDED THIRD ACTS

In some movies (usually within the action genre), the third act can be quite extensive, taking up a good third—or more—of the film. You can see examples of this in THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL, X2: X-MEN UNITED, and ROBIN HOOD.

In stories like these, the trough is likely to end well before the three-quarter mark. Frequently, it will be merged with the midpoint, a structural combination discussed in more detail in the “Duration” section of this chapter.

Observe that the examples I listed above are all filled with twists guaranteed to delight audiences till the very end. Every last drop of entertainment value has been milked from their third acts.

If your screenplay is as gripping as these films, you can toss all the structural rules out the window. As long as a reader wants to keep on turning the pages, you've told a good story. It doesn't matter if the trough of hell ends at page 50, at page 85, or somewhere in between.

But if your screenplay isn't that gripping, if it doesn't keep a reader turning the pages, then take a second look at these structural guidelines (and the precedents set by their exceptions).

Reigning in your script's proportions and getting your trough to toe the three-quarter line may be just the way to get your script back on track.

ENSEMBLE FILMS

Since ensemble films are comprised of multiple storylines, the trough of hell of each protagonist will often be scattered throughout the second act. Some will take place early on, while others will occur closer to the 75%-mark of the story.

This scattershot approach still tends to be effective, primarily because, in this case, audience engagement is not just a function of their emotional involvement. It's additionally enhanced by their discovery of the connective threads between each of the storylines.

Thus, the ideal ensemble film is comprised of troughs of varying degrees of intensity, which are interconnected in a satisfying and compelling way.

Duration

Now that we've established that the trough of hell will usually conclude three quarters of the way into your script, you're probably wondering how many screenplay pages should be dedicated to this critical plot point.

Just how long is the ideal trough of hell?

Well, it all depends. Genre is one crucial factor. On the whole, the troughs for comedies and romantic comedies lean towards the shorter end of the spectrum, while the troughs for action movies and thrillers are longer.

Your goals for the climax also play a significant role. For instance, during Act Three, your hero may have to engage in two separate rescue missions (UP, HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN) or repair two separate relationships (HITCH, JERRY MAGUIRE). If that's the case, the trough of hell needs to set up *both* goals.

Additionally, the content of your hero's post-trough realization needs to be taken into account. Depending on what your hero has to learn (and how resistant he is to learning it), he may have to endure a lot...or very little.

Ultimately, each of these storytelling objectives could be accomplished in a trough of three screenplay pages. They could also be accomplished in ten.

The complexity of your story, the need for proportion, and the requirements of pacing will all determine the ideal trough length for your story. But, at the end of the day, it boils down to how inventive you want to be.

The boundaries of your imagination will be the most critical factor to determine the duration of your story's trough.

Practically speaking, trough lengths can be divided into three categories: truncated, average, and extended. Let's take a look at each one in turn:

Truncated

As the name implies, these troughs are very brief, around 3-4 minutes long. They're ideally suited for comedies, wherein multiple aspects of the hero's life may unravel in quick succession.

Because of this compression, these setbacks don't take up much screentime. For example, in *DAVE*, *LEGALLY BLONDE*, and *MISS CONGENIALITY*, the hero's life goes downhill in less time than it takes to poach an egg.

Truncated troughs are also ideally suited for screenplays which employ the medieval mace rate of infliction. As mentioned earlier in Part I, the blow from one mace often directly causes a blow to fall upon the head of another.

Although this approach isn't limited to romantic comedies, it's seen most often in this genre. *WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS* and *10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU* are two good examples. In both movies, the heroine experiences an upsetting revelation (blow #1) which subsequently causes a rift between her and the hero (blow #2).

Average

These troughs run about 5-10 minutes long. They often follow the pattern described in the "Pain Comes in Pairs" advanced trough technique: a stunt-based sequence will culminate in the hero's emotional devastation. We covered a bunch of examples in that section of this book; here are a few more.

In *CLASH OF THE TITANS* (2010), Perseus battles the Medusa in a sequence packed with action (and CGI effects) before witnessing the murder of his lover, Io. In *THE BOURNE IDENTITY*, Jason squares off against another assassin in the French countryside before parting ways with his only friend in the world, Marie.

In a slight twist, in *KNIGHT AND DAY*, the emotional wounds occur before the action sequence. First, June and Roy discover they've been betrayed by each other; these discoveries are followed by a suspense-filled rooftop chase.

In *TROY*, because of the use of misdirection, things get a little complicated. The Trojan prince Hector battles the Greek warrior Achilles, eventually slitting Achilles's throat. However, everyone—audience included—has been misled.

Hector has actually slain Achilles's young cousin, Patroclus, who had disguised his identity by donning Achilles's distinctive armor. This revelation leads to emotional devastation for both heroes. Achilles, naturally, mourns the death of his cousin, while Hector regrets killing someone so young and innocent.

On the DVD version of the film, this pair of sequences is appropriately titled "Bitter Triumph" and "Bitter Tragedy." Incidentally, DVD sequence titles can be a great source of inspiration if you ever need more ideas. Their names will often give you direct insight into what the filmmakers hoped to accomplish with the hero's trough of hell.

If you recall, painful duos don't always include an action component. Instead, the hero may be derailed by a combination of emotional wounds, perhaps losing friendship, then love.

Unlike truncated troughs, these scenes of loss are less compressed, sometimes separated by other story developments and often unfolding at a more leisurely pace. For example, the break-up scene in *JERRY MAGUIRE*—not including the ensuing montage—takes 3 minutes. In contrast, the break-up scene in *10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU* takes place in less than 30 seconds.

Extended

Ten minutes or longer, these trough sequences string together so many distressing developments, the hero never gains solid footing. The ground's constantly buckling underneath him.

Frequently, the hero will experience setbacks within multiple subplots until he reaches his own personal "all is lost" moment where it seems impossible to achieve his main goal.

For example, in *THE HUNGER GAMES*, Katniss must come to terms with the death of Rue, whom she's watched over like a mother hen (subplot); grapple with her mixed feelings towards Peeta who's on death's door (subplot); and fend off the tribute from District 2 who almost succeeds in killing her (main plot).

The same pattern can be found in *SHERLOCK HOLMES*. The intrepid detective must rescue his love interest, Irene, who's being used as bait by the villain (subplot); grapple with guilt caused by bringing Watson to death's door (subplot); and evade the police, who eventually arrest him and bring him, handcuffed, to the office of the villain's pawn (main plot).

In some films, the climax dominates the tail end of the movie to such a degree that the trough is perforce combined with the midpoint. These two essential plot points are so intricately intertwined that they're virtually indistinguishable from each other. The result is a highly memorable sequence which precipitates the lengthy climax. Previously mentioned examples include *PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL*, *X2: X-MEN UNITED*, and *ROBIN HOOD: PRINCE OF THIEVES*.

There is one major drawback to melding the trough with the midpoint. The emotional impact of the former can get lost in the dramatics of the latter. This is especially true if audiences aren't given a lot of time to absorb and reflect on what the hero loses—or almost loses—right after the midpoint.

X2 is a good case in point. Rogue's near-death experience gets lost in the shuffle of the frenzied activity which preceded it. Nevertheless, the film managed to balance the scales of emotion.

Its secret? It killed off one of the protagonists during the climax, a development which supplied the story with an emotional weight it had been lacking.

Let's pretend for a moment that you are writing a spy movie in the vein of *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE IV – GHOST PROTOCOL*. Your draft is very similar to the one screened in theaters across the globe. Ethan and his team (Jane, Benji, and Brandt) plan to give the villain's henchman, Wistrom, authentic nuclear activation codes.

Everything goes according to plan until assassin Sabine Moreau realizes something's afoot. Mayhem ensues. Ethan and Brandt defend themselves against Moreau's armed bodyguards. Jane apprehends Moreau, eventually pushing (okay, technically kicking) the assassin through a hole in the team's glass-walled suite.

This is where your script starts to diverge from the movie. Ethan still pursues Wistrom inside the hotel, but when Ethan reaches the exit, *he's thwarted*. (You decide how.)

This trough is suitably dramatic. It delivers on the genre goods. It brings a reader to the "all is lost" moment in a credible and entertaining way. *It's also where most beginning screenwriters would stop*.

Who would blame them? They've written a gripping thriller which would keep readers turning the pages.

But more seasoned writers wouldn't be satisfied with this Act Two ending, as good as it is. They'd want more. More twists, more action, more suspense, more pages.

More fun.

They'd think of a clever way to extend the trough. In *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE IV*, this was accomplished by incorporating a chase sequence set against the backdrop of a Dubai sandstorm.

While extended troughs are the hallmark of highly skilled screenwriters, of course, they're not always justified. Such complicated troughs can strain the boundaries of your story premise, producing scenes which are more likely to confuse than entertain.

That being said, it's smart to get into the habit of imagining ways to elongate your trough by adding an extra twist to it.

Be honest with yourself. Have you really taken your trough sequence as far as you can go? Have you left your hero stymied at the hotel exit—or have you thrust him into the middle of an oncoming sandstorm?

One new complication—even a minor one—can exponentially increase the entertainment value of your screenplay.

Pacing

When you're analyzing your favorite movies to understand how various filmmakers approached the hero's trough of hell, you may find it difficult to identify when the trough actually begins. This is especially true for films in which the hero's very existence is one hellacious nightmare (like in *TAKEN*, *THE BOURNE IDENTITY*, *THE HUNGER GAMES*, and *GROUNDHOG DAY*).

Personally, I look for an area in a story which (1) is after the midpoint, (2) possesses a concentrated dose of setbacks, and (3), culminates in a moment where it seems impossible for the hero to achieve his goal.

Likewise, it can be equally tricky to determine when the trough ends. You may choose to include its fallout as part of the trough's duration, or you may not. Truth be told, this is all very subjective.

Determining the duration of this particular set of scenes isn't that important anyway. Whether you believe that the trough of a movie is 10 or 20 minutes long, you can still borrow its storytelling techniques to enthrall audiences the world over.

The key is to understand how the duration of your trough—and its aftermath—affect the pacing of your story.

The ideal trough gives audiences enough time to feel its impact, and then, afterwards, to regroup their emotions.

In action movies especially, the emotional aspect of the trough gives the audience room to catch their breath between the frenzied action of the midpoint and climax.

As director Gore Verbinski observes in the commentary of *PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL*, "I think it's good to take a dip after the ship-to-ship battle, it's great to take a dip, to slow things down."

Going back to *MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE IV*, the fisticuff sequence in the luxurious hotel and the chase sequence in the Dubai sandstorm were counterbalanced by the slower scenes which followed them. Brandt reveals his backstory; Ethan consoles Jane about the death of her partner; Ethan negotiates with an arms dealer; and Benji preps Brandt for the next part of their mission. While the former two are noticeably more "touchy-feely" than the latter pair, all four scenes give the audience breathing room before their senses are assaulted by the breakneck pace of the climax.

It's extremely tricky, however, to maintain this balance. Many screenwriters go wrong here, overloading this area of their screenplay with too much emotion, too much "slow stuff." Lots of words may fly around, but very little actually happens on-screen.

As a matter of fact, although everything turned out "beautiful" in the end, initially Gore Verbinski harbored concerns about "the dip" scene in *THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL* mentioned a few paragraphs ago, the one in which Sparrow and Elizabeth deal with the ramifications of being banished to a deserted island. "As written, it was eight and a half minutes long," he comments before Johnny Depp chimes in. "Right, and suddenly, the momentum is 'puh-whoomph.'"

That's a very good point (and illustrates why listening to director commentaries will tremendously advance your storytelling skills). The trough of hell sequence—and your hero's reaction to it—shouldn't be so long that the entire momentum of your screenplay comes to a screeching halt.

Yes, audiences need time to feel the impact of the trough and to catch their breath. But if you give them too much time, they'll become bored and impatient.

You never want them to be in a position where they're asking, "Can we get to the final showdown already? Why are you dragging this out for so long?"

To demonstrate, let's revisit the second act ending of *WEDDING CRASHERS*. John Beckwith experiences one blow after another. To review: he's unmasked as a fraud to Claire, the woman he loves, (incidentally right after she reveals she "maybe" felt the same way about him). To top it off, Claire is engaged to a scumbag on steroids, who pummels John to a pulp on the evening of Claire's engagement party.

John's best friend, Jeremy, who should have been by John's side, left John high and dry in order to hook up with another woman. The fact that she's Claire's sister—and that Jeremy has genuine feelings for her—rubs salt in John's already painful wounds.

A montage of moping ensues. John is so desperate, he resorts to crashing weddings alone. “Love doesn’t exist,” he says pathetically to a group of children attending one wedding. “And I’m not picking on love ‘cause I don’t think friendship exists either.” In testament to that statement, he spends the night with only a bottle of alcohol for company at the Lincoln Memorial where he and Jeremy used to scheme together.

Still feeling low on his birthday, John celebrates by reading a book entitled *Don’t Jump: Life’s Really Worth It*. Jeremy chooses this moment to visit his buddy and confess he’s engaged to Claire’s sister. That’s the last straw for John, who eventually crashes a *funeral* (an inspired, if crass, take on the post-trough realization which was discussed earlier).

For the sake of argument, let’s say that this trough begins when John is unmasked to Claire, but we’ll leave its ending point open. You may conclude that it ends when John realizes Jeremy abandoned him to hook up with Claire’s sister. Alternately, you may decide it ends when Jeremy drops his engagement bombshell. It doesn’t really matter.

The net effect of this series of scenes is the same—they significantly slow down the pace of the story.

Sure, it was nice to witness John being authentic (which provided a much-needed contrast to the raunchy hijinks), but the wand of sentiment was wielded with too enthusiastic a hand. This series of scenes could’ve definitely been shortened, dramatically improving the story’s pace without detracting from its capacity to elicit emotion.

True, the film still performed handsomely at the box office, raking in \$209 million (domestic). Nevertheless, you should be more cautious about slowing down *your* story to such a degree.

Genre Specifics

No matter the genre of your screenplay, your hero’s trough of hell is always going to be an emotional low point. Even so, various genres come with their own specific quagmires. To avoid getting bogged down by them, carefully study the tips in this chapter.

That being said, each recommendation is rooted in the principles of great storytelling. So, even if you’re not writing a romantic comedy, for instance, you can still benefit from reading that particular section.

Thrillers and Action Movies

In *How I Write*, author Janet Evanovich shares her secrets for developing the Stephanie Plum series, whose novels routinely reign over the bestseller lists. When asked why almost every Plum book “has a car or two exploding, or blown up, or at the very least, shot at,” the short version of her answer could be summed up in one word: Hollywood.

The longer version goes like this: “Initially I blew up a car in *One for the Money* because I wanted to sell the book as a movie, too, and that seemed like the kind of thing they like in Hollywood. But I had so much fun blowing up the car that I just kept on going.”

This approach certainly works for Evanovich. In theory, it should work for aspiring screenwriters too. But beginners tend to embrace this story fix with too much enthusiasm, cramming as many explosions, shootouts, fisticuffs, and high-speed chases into their scripts as they can.

If the story flags—especially towards the end of the second act—their go-to solution is to ratchet up the action, and then ratchet it up some more.

Yet, this often does more harm than good. Ethan Van der Ryn, supervising sound editor for the LORD OF THE RINGS trilogy explains it best. “The most difficult thing from a sound effects design point of view is a battle scene. What you quickly learn when you’re working on a battle scene is that less can be more. In a way, it’s a little counterintuitive because when you’re in the middle of an action scene, you think of all this sound happening all around. But if you really let it play that way, it ends up being too much. The sounds end up canceling each other out. So you end up building in beats of silence.”

Van der Ryn was talking from the point of view of designing sound effects, but the same principle applies to writing action scenes. If you jam too many action stunts together, they lose their effect.

Bombarded by too much sensation, audiences eventually become numb to the action and tune out. In other words, too

much noise creates silence. Or, to borrow from *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* written by Renni Browne and Dave King, “one plus one equals one half.”

So if you can't prop up a flagging action movie by adding another action sequence, then what should you do? Look for ways to distress your hero which threaten his emotional and psychological, as opposed to physical, well-being.

Attack his mind and spirit instead of his body.

Take *TAKEN*, an action movie at the top of its game. If you examine the latter half of the second act, there's action to be sure, but perhaps less than you'd expect to find in a successful action movie. In addition to single-handedly eliminating a posse of Albanian criminals, hero Bryan Mills endures several emotional wounds.

To begin with, he breaks down and cries by the bedside of a drugged girl who was abducted by the same prostitution ring as his daughter, Kimmy. Then, he locates a friend of Kimmy's who was taken at the same time. The girl is dead, having choked on her own vomit.

After that unpleasant discovery, he learns that his former colleague receives bribes from the prostitution ring to look the other way—an act of corruption which indirectly enabled Kimmy's own abduction. Finally, in his most horrifying experience yet, Bryan watches perverts bidding on his “certified pure” daughter at a live auction.

On the whole, during the end of Act Two, the threats to Bryan's body were few. But the threats to his soul were many.

In *THE BOURNE IDENTITY*, which is one of the truly great action movies, hero Jason Bourne endures even less physical duress than Bryan Mills. First, he discovers that he's not only Jason Bourne, but he's also John M Kane—only Kane is supposed to have died in a car accident, while he, Bourne, is very much alive. This distressing insight is followed by one far more unpleasant. Bourne realizes that he's not the good guy he believes himself to be. In truth, he's a trained CIA-assassin who attempted to murder an African leader three weeks ago.

Unsurprisingly, the news hits Bourne hard, creating an intensely painful psychic wound. His love interest, Marie, doesn't take it well either. She almost abandons him, but he manages to convince her to allow him to take her to a safe place, which turns out to be her brother's second home in the French countryside.

There, in the middle of the night, his voice filled with aching vulnerability, Bourne asks her not to desert him. “We have this money. We can hide. Can we do that? Is there any chance you can do that?”

The next morning, another CIA operative arrives at the French estate with the intent to kill Bourne and everyone else present. An explosion and a shootout ensue—the most action we've seen since the car chase at the movie's midpoint. Bourne bests his opponent without incurring a single physical injury (which, again, probably goes against the way you'd anticipate the second act of an action movie to play out).

Even so, the altercation still leaves its mark. It forces Bourne to acknowledge—and act upon—the truth. Even if Marie agreed to it, there's no chance they could hide out together. His masters at the CIA would never permit it. As a result, Bourne parts with Marie, sustaining a significant emotional loss, all the more painful because she's his only friend in the world.

In the behind-the-scenes featurette *ACCESS GRANTED*, screenwriter Tony Gilroy, who penned all four movies in the Bourne franchise, shared the following perspective on writing the first film: “I really believe that if you could make something intimate...if the gravity in the movie was the same as the gravity in the parking lot when you left...if it felt like your life, and it was simple, and you cared about everybody, that it could be just as exciting as if it was 60 motorcycles on the West Side Highway.”

To put it another way, the second half of Act Two contains a prime opportunity to give your story the intimate feel Gilroy was talking about. It's your chance to portray your action movie hero in a vulnerable light, to show the man behind the one-man army.

These moments fascinate audiences, and rightly so. When a hero lays himself bare, he displays a different kind of courage than they are used to seeing.

Gilroy was lucky. Vulnerability was built right into *THE BOURNE IDENTITY*'s premise: a spy suffers from amnesia. Despite Bourne's physical prowess and martial arts skills, he doesn't know who he is.

Without an identity, he's weak. That juxtaposition—of strength and fragility—thoroughly permeated the story, turning an ordinary action flick into something special.

Your action movie hero doesn't have to suffer from amnesia in order for you to showcase his vulnerability. In *TAKEN*, Bryan Mills is very well aware of who he is, and what he can do. Yet, despite his special set of skills, at one point, he's so overcome by feelings of powerlessness, he weeps. *That* moment was just as critical to the movie's success as all of its action sequences.

Likewise, James Bond temporarily sheds his defenses in *CASINO ROYALE*. "I have no armor left," he says, laying his soul bare to Vesper Lynd. "You stripped it off me and tossed it away. Whatever is left of me...whatever is left, whatever I am...I am yours."

He then follows this frank admission with another: "Like you said. You do what I do for too long, and there won't be any soul left to salvage. I'm leaving with what little is left of mine. Is it enough for you?" Since James Bond typically never displays vulnerability in the long-running franchise, this scene is doubly powerful and effective.

Laying bare your hero's soul isn't just pleasing to audiences. It's pleasing to actors too. In the preceding section on pacing, we briefly touched on the scene in *THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL* where Jack Sparrow and Elizabeth Swann get marooned on a deserted island. The scene created a welcome respite after the action-heavy ship-to-ship battle of the film's midpoint.

But it did more than that. It also forced Sparrow to explain the truth of how he escaped from the island the first time. He didn't use sea turtles tied together with human hair. Far less poetically, he bartered passage off the island from run-runners (now out of business).

As Gore Verbinski observes in the DVD commentary, in this moment, Jack Sparrow "is completely deconstructed. The jacket's off, the hat's off, the myth is gone...completely evaporated." Which pretty much is the long way of saying this scene is all about Jack's vulnerability.

It may surprise you to learn that this scene is also the one actor Johnny Depp remembers most vividly. Not his cleverly comedic introduction, not his swordfight in the smithy, not his transformation into a cursed skeleton on the *Isla de Muerta*. It's *this* scene which sticks out for him the most, "because it was Jack exposed, really exposed for the first time."

Don't get me wrong. Your screenplay must have a requisite amount of action in order to fulfill audience expectations of the genre. But in the strongest action movies, these scenes are counterbalanced by ones which affect the heart, rather than the glands.

If your story meets the threshold level of action, and still feels lacking, try exploring calmer ways to engage audiences (while, as always, being conscious of pacing).

This may entail a scene where the hero showcases his vulnerability, where he discovers unpleasant truths about himself, or perhaps a scene where he's betrayed by someone he trusted (the bait and switch trough type). All three enable you to avoid repeating the same story beat of adrenaline-pumping action in scene after scene, without losing audience interest.

Comedies

Screenwriters of comedies tend to fix ailing scripts by overloading them with too much emotion, rather than humor. It's like their screenplay is one giant soiree, and the comedy gags, unfortunately, got left behind at the coat-check.

This is especially true for the second half of Act Two. In their attempts to craft an "all is lost" moment with emotional impact, amateurs tend to neglect the jokes. The result is a screenplay which succeeds structure-wise, but which fails genre-wise.

Incorporating humor into the trough of hell sequence is the obvious solution, which not only takes the story where it needs to go, but also fulfills genre requirements. There are two key ways to accomplish this: compression and sustained agony. While both are effective, the latter requires more skill to execute successfully. Both are discussed in detail below.

In comedies, during the hero's trough of hell, he often experiences multiple wounds, one right after the other. This pattern makes sense since humor is supposed to build on itself. To quote from John Truby's [analysis of DATE NIGHT](#), "The laughs should stand on the waves of the laughs that come before until the audience is gasping for breath."

Since brevity, after all, is the soul of wit, the most successful trough sequences do more than wound the hero multiple times. *They compress the hero's wounds into a brief span of time, or at the very least, compress them into one location.*

This creates the waves of laughter Truby was describing. It also has the added benefit of improving the story's pace. Without this compression, the trough of hell sequence tends to drag, and consequently, fails miserably to entertain.

LIAR LIAR is a textbook example of how to wound your hero in a comedy. Thanks to his son's birthday wish, attorney Fletcher Reede is unable to lie for twenty-four hours. Despite his predicament, Fletcher manages to win an important court case.

He should be riding high, and he is...until his client, Mrs Cole, decides to pursue sole custody of her children in order to secure larger child support payments. However, unlike her ex-husband who clearly cares about his children, Mrs Cole doesn't have their best interests at heart.

A father himself, Fletcher is consumed by self-loathing as he realizes that he's probably enabled the mercenary Mrs Cole to separate her children from their loving dad. In desperation, he questions the judge's ruling. "One more word out of you, Mr Reede, and I'll hold you in contempt," the judge threatens.

But the judge's threat is nothing in comparison to Fletcher's psychological distress. He replies with heart-wrenching despair, "I hold myself in contempt. Why should you be any different?"

That's the first "cut" in Fletcher's series of wounds. The second follows immediately thereafter. The judge makes good on his threat and imprisons the conscience-stricken attorney. This leads to Fletcher's next cut. Because he's in jail, he can't fulfill his promise to play baseball with his son—his last chance to redeem himself as a father.

When Fletcher uses his one phone call to tell his wife the news, she inflicts the last, and most hurtful cut, of all: she's moving across the country with their son, someplace where Fletcher can't hurt the boy anymore by breaking another promise.

Each of these cuts occurs in rapid succession, and together, takes up less than 3 minutes. By compressing the infliction of pain into a limited time frame, the film creates a moment of emotional impact without slowing down the pace or stultifying its comic edge.

In addition to squeezing your hero's wounds into a brief span of time, you can also squash them into one location. The climax of CRAZY STUPID LOVE is a wonderful example of this. After his wife announces she wants a divorce, Cal tries to piece his shattered world back together. But everything backfires spectacularly. By the movie's end, he's managed to alienate his wife (again), his oldest daughter, his only son, his former best friend, and a newly acquired pal. In a brilliant move, all of these losses occur in the same place: Cal's backyard.

It would've been a lot easier to separate these losses into individual scenes and scatter them across a variety of settings. A lot easier, but less effective. Condensing Cal's alienation from every major character into one location—and compressing them into a span of 3 minutes—enabled each loss to ricochet off of the other, enhancing their comedic potential and intensifying the scene's power.

Now that I've convinced you about the power of compression, let's apply your newfound knowledge to improve WEDDING CRASHERS. Hero John Beckwith incurs many losses, but these occur over a period of time and across a variety of locations. For example, John gets pummeled by Claire's fiancé at her engagement party (location #1). When John visits Jeremy's house (location #2) to learn why his wingman was a no-show, he discovers Jeremy hooking up with Claire's sister, Gloria.

With a few tweaks, these "cuts" could've been condensed with respect to time *and* location. Jeremy could've easily arrived at Claire's engagement party in disguise as the two men had planned, but Jeremy didn't come to John's rescue because he was distracted by Gloria. Only after John lies bleeding on the sidewalk, does Jeremy rush to his best friend's side, with Gloria trailing behind him.

Quickly piecing everything together, John turns on Jeremy, initiating their rift. This hypothetical scenario accomplishes the same story goals of (a) alienating John from Jeremy and (b) preventing John from winning back Claire—without unnecessarily prolonging the story.

If your comedy is too long, try to think of ways to compress your hero's pain. In addition to heightening the humor, it

will also trim down your page count. That being said, there are times when it pays off to prolong your hero's pain and to sustain his agony for as long as possible.

Aping a pattern commonly found in action movies, this kind of trough entails a lengthy genre-fulfilling sequence which culminates in an emotional low point for the hero. As already noted in Part I, the major difference between action movies and comedies is that the hero's pain is played for laughs. In an action movie, audiences would be biting their nails in suspense. In a comedy, witnessing the same pain, they'd be munching on their popcorn with glee.

If you've been studying screenwriting for a while, you've probably come across the idea that you must fulfill the promise of the premise contained within your movie idea.

If you're familiar with Blake Snyder's Beat Sheet, as described in *Save the Cat*, you know that he advises you to fulfill the promise of your premise during the first half of Act Two. He calls this part of script the "fun and games" section. When he was asked to include more set pieces in his scripts, this is where he'd put them.

I think *Save the Cat* is a wonderful resource, filled with practical advice you can implement to immediately improve your screenplay. But on this point, I disagree with Monsieur Snyder.

Well, sort of. I agree with him that you need to fulfill the promise of your premise during this part of your screenplay, otherwise studio readers will toss your script down with equal parts disgust and frustration.

But, if you're writing a comedy, the first half of Act Two might not be the best time to go out in full-force. Do the "lite" version of your fun and games here. Save the best set pieces and comedy gags for the trough and climax.

This way, your screenplay will be funniest at the very end. [According to John Truby](#), this is the gold standard in comedy writing, "which almost never happens."

But *you* can make it happen. Easily. All you have to do is make your hero's trough of hell one never-ending stream of gags, each of which builds upon the other.

HOME ALONE, directed by Chris Columbus and written by John Hughes, is a classic example, with the twist that the villains—two bumbling burglars—are the ones in a constant state of duress.

If you had to boil down the premise of HOME ALONE to one sentence, it might look like this: an eight-year-old kid (Kevin), who's accidentally left home alone during Christmas, must defend his home against two burglars (Harry and Marvin).

When you read that, what kind of gags come immediately to your mind? What kind of set pieces do you think fulfill the promise of this premise? If you're like me, you're probably thinking about booby traps. Lots and lots of booby traps.

HOME ALONE has booby traps in spades, but notice that they're most concentrated towards the final quarter of the movie. As a matter of fact, it took the film 76 minutes to begin to fulfill the promise of its premise in earnest.

To amuse us until then, the script was still chockfull of gags. Some of them (Kevin fleeing Harry and Marvin and seeking refuge in a nativity scene; Kevin scaring them off with music, mannequins, and a cardboard cutout of Michael Jordan; Kevin fooling Marvin by playing the movie ANGELS WITH FILTHY SOULS) do indeed fulfill the movie's premise.

Even so, they're small-scale confrontations. They're "fun and games lite," not the real deal. The true fulfillment of the premise, the real fun and games, were saved for the tail end of the screenplay. Although the film is funny throughout, the comedy blockbuster achieves that gold standard of being funniest towards the end.

MRS DOUBTFIRE, another film helmed by Chris Columbus, also saves the biggest jokes and gags for the finale. This film actually achieves the rare feat of fulfilling the promise of its premise—in full-force—throughout the second act. But the most elaborate comedic sequence is saved for last. At the end, the humor doesn't dissipate the way it does in the majority of mediocre comedies.

Instead, the jokes build on one other, escalating the comic tension to an almost unbearable degree. While this sequence is part of the film's climax, it's a wonderful example of sustaining a hero's agony for comedic effect. As such, it's the perfect model to borrow from to create your own hero's trough of hell.

To achieve this comic height, the story brings together two separate storylines. Daniel Hillard, as Mrs Doubtfire, is asked to accompany the Hillard family to a special dinner to celebrate his ex-wife's birthday. (His ex-wife's new beau, Stuart, will be there too.) On the same evening (Friday), at the same time (7 pm), and at the same restaurant (Bridge's), Daniel's boss, Mr Lundy, wants to discuss Daniel's ideas for a children's TV program, which is a huge career opportunity for him.

With the stage set for comedic mayhem, the sequence begins outside the restaurant. Mrs Doubtfire and the Hillard family arrive at the same time as Mr Lundy. Observing his boss approaching the restaurant, Daniel murmurs under his breath, "Oh God. Here we go," making it clear that he—as well as audiences—are going to be in for one hellacious ride.

When the Hillard family enters the restaurant, Mrs Doubtfire convinces them to take a table in the smoking section. This effectively creates three "fronts" within the setting: the Hillard family's table in the smoking section, Mr Lundy's table in the non-smoking section, and, finally, the restaurant's restroom. As the sequence progresses, Daniel (and Mrs Doubtfire)—much to audiences' delight—will be buffeted between each like a ping pong ball.

In an artful combination of farce and wordplay, Daniel sustains his ruse through a variety of maneuvers—even smoothly explaining away perfume and lipstick, vestiges of Mrs Doubtfire, to Mr Lundy. But then, drunk and discombobulated, Daniel makes a major blunder and arrives at Lundy's table in full Doubtfire garb. Quickly forestalling exposure, Daniel introduces Mrs Doubtfire as a potential new host for a children's TV show. Career disaster averted!

But the jig can't go on forever, and another catastrophe waits in the wings. In a jealous pique, Daniel snuck into the restaurant's kitchen and sprinkled chili pepper onto Stu's shrimp entrée. Allergic to the spice, Stu starts to choke. Mrs Doubtfire rushes to Stu's aid, initiating perhaps the longest Heimlich maneuver in cinematic history.

Mrs Doubtfire's spirited attempt to save Stu's life does more than keep the laughs coming. In her vigor, she dislodges her prosthetic face, revealing her true identity. Daniel is unmasked at last. Observe that by delaying the unmasking till the climax, the film gifted audiences with 17 minutes of comic delight—while burdening Daniel with 17 minutes of sheer agony.

It may appear like I'm contradicting myself. Earlier I recommended that you condense your trough of hell sequence into a brief span of time, and now I'm advocating that you sustain it for as long as possible. So what should it be, long or short?

Like with everything, it all depends on the needs of *your* story.

Will trimming down your hero's trough make it funnier? Or will it become more humorous if you expand it? Only you can determine which method will increase your script's comedic potential and maintain your story's momentum, without straining story logic.

The point, really, is that whichever way you choose, you mustn't neglect to fulfill genre requirements at this critical juncture of your story.

Amateurs and pros alike can make the mistake of stuffing all of their comedy gags into the beginning of their screenplays, leaving the second half curiously devoid of humor. In his [analysis of THE HANGOVER](#), John Truby sums it up best:

"Most writers think they can write a good movie comedy if they're funny. They think all you have to do is string together a lot of jokes and gags and you'll have a successful comedy script. How wrong they are. It's not just amateurs who make this mistake. Many of the top comedy screenwriters in the business write 'front-loaded' scripts, meaning they try to pack as many jokes in the first 10 minutes as they can. That seems like a good idea; once you get the audience laughing they're bound to keep laughing. In reality, these scripts hit 'the wall' about ten to 15 minutes in and miraculously they're not funny anymore."

Whether you compress or sustain your hero's agony, ideally, the back-end of your screenplay is just as funny as its beginning.

At the same time, in your quest to amplify your script's comedy quotient, make sure that you don't neglect to give voice to emotional truths. In truly great comedies, each coexists side by side, neither getting supplanted by the other. That combination will also attract top talent to your script.

Don't believe me? Listen to Mrs Doubtfire...well, actually, actor Robin Williams. While the actor was intrigued by the

idea of playing the sassy dame, he didn't fully commit to the project until he received director Chris Columbus's rewrite, which achieved that balance.

As Williams explains in a behind-the-scenes featurette, "His [Columbus's] rewrite came in, and I said, this looks interesting...it finally had an emotional feel to it, plus it was funny. He heightened the comedy, plus gave it an emotional level, which is great. And *that's* when I said I'll do it."

Humor and heart. Now, that's storytelling magic.

Romantic Comedies

Since romantic comedies are a hybrid genre, you can get away with a trough of hell which lacks humor. As long as it has some romantic aspect (usually evinced through a stunning display of vulnerability in which the hero or heroine puts his/her heart on the line), it will fulfill genre requirements.

That being said, if you can punctuate this emotional low point with glimpses of humor—however brief—your rom-com will stand head and shoulders above the rest.

NOTTING HILL is a wonderful example of this. After treating Will shabbily—twice—Anna swoops back into his bookshop to seek his forgiveness. In reference to the large wrapped gift behind her, she says, "I actually had it in my apartment in New York and just thought you'd...but, when it came to it, I didn't know how to call you...having behaved so...badly, twice. So it's been just sitting in the hotel. But then...you came, so I figured...the thing is...the thing is..."

We don't learn what "the thing" is right away because Anna and Will's conversation is interrupted by an annoying customer, who can't grasp that Will's travel bookshop doesn't sell novels. This is the first comedic moment to punctuate the sequence (made all the more enjoyable by the fact that it's a callback to a scene from the film's beginning).

After Anna asks Will if he could ever like her again, more comedic moments ensue. Before Will can respond, his assistant informs him that Will's mother is on the phone. A joke about Will's mother's blackish toe is followed by one in which Will's assistant confuses Anna with another actress (Demi Moore). After these brief comic interludes, the scene then goes into emotional hyperdrive, wherein Anna and Will both evince heartbreaking vulnerability.

If you can't think of a feasible way to temper emotion with humor at this point in your screenplay, don't fret. It's certainly not a dealbreaker.

You've actually got a much bigger problem to worry about: *everybody knows exactly what's going to happen*.

In other genres, this isn't such an issue. Having subconsciously absorbed story structure from watching hundreds of movies, audiences might have the vague sense that at this point in the story, the hero will be approaching an "all is lost" moment.

For some savvy audience members, this feeling might be less vague and more concrete. Regardless, they won't be able to predict exactly what that low point will entail.

It would be fairly difficult to predict that Elle's professor would sexually assault her (LEGALLY BLONDE). Or that Goose would die in a training exercise (TOP GUN). Or that Worley would commit suicide (AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN). Or that Ray Castro would die by trying to call an ambulance to help a hit man (TRAFFIC). Or that Dwayne would discover he's colorblind (LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE). (And if you could make these predictions in advance—especially the one about Dwayne—then you should really explore a career as a psychic rather than as a screenwriter.)

But in a romantic comedy, this plot point is pretty much written in stone: *boy loses girl*.

Since everyone can predict what's going to happen, it's easy for this moment of social alienation to become stale. But if the confrontation between your hero and heroine is truly unique (and you are doing it *in person* right? Not via phone, or text, or email?), if it's truly specific to your characters and/or your story world, then this predictable story beat will be far less likely to bore.

In THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT, the content of the break-up scene dialogue is quite specific to this story. After the president's backdoor-dealing gets Sydney fired, Sydney furiously confronts the president in his private White House

chambers. “That’s a great idea. I think you should call Leo [Sydney’s boss] and make a deal. He hires me back for 72 days. I go around scaring the hell out of Congress, making them think the president’s about to drive through a damaging and costly bill. They’ll believe me because I’m the president’s Friday-night gal. Now, I don’t know if we can dip into that well twice, especially since I’ve lost all credibility in politics, but, you never know. I might be able to just pull it off again. I might be able to give you just the leverage you need to pass some ground-breaking piece of crime legislation.”

In any other rom-com break-up scene, these words wouldn’t make much sense. In this politically-charged one, they’re pitch perfect.

In BRIDGET JONES’S DIARY 2: THE EDGE OF REASON, a Thai prison is the setting for Bridget and Darcy’s final (at least until the climax) confrontation. It’s a rare romantic comedy which could end Act Two in this location without contorting story logic to an unnatural degree.

In THE HOLIDAY, neither the dialogue, nor the backdrop is particularly unique, but the scene maintains a level of freshness because it plays against gender conventions. Amanda is the coolheaded pragmatist; Graham is the teary-eyed romantic.

Of course, all of this is irrelevant if studio readers or ticket-buyers or movie-renters aren’t invested in your hero and/or heroine in the first place. In a romantic comedy, the fate of the world isn’t at stake. Just the happiness of two people.

If audiences don’t care about those people, then they won’t care about their (fictitious) happiness, and then you have no stakes.

No stakes, no story.

On the other hand, if audiences are on board with your characters, they will care about their (fictitious) broken hearts. Because your characters are hurting, audiences will hurt too.

It doesn’t matter that they could see the break-up scene from a thousand miles away. Or that they’ve witnessed this same story beat in a hundred other romantic comedies. This moment will still have impact, impact which directly correlates to their level of caring.

So, how exactly do you get audiences to care about your protagonists? We covered this topic a little bit in the “Demonstrate the Value” section of Part I, wherein we discussed saving cats and undeserved misfortunes.

But, to be frank, this subject matter is worthy of a more detailed answer than can be shared in this screenwriting guide. Suffice to say, *even though audience investment is an essential ingredient for a screenplay in any genre, in a plot-predictable romantic comedy, it’s particularly vital.*

To achieve this emotional investment, screenwriters are often encouraged to make their heroes and heroines likeable. While the two do indeed occur in frequent conjunction, they are not synonymous.

Audiences can get emotionally invested in unpleasant characters as well, ardently desiring to witness the unlikeable protagonist’s comeuppance—especially at the hands of Cupid’s arrow.

Which means that the hero (or heroine) of a romantic comedy can be one of two species: *homo likeabilis* or *homo jerkus*. *Homo likeabilis* heroes are charismatic, perhaps flawed, but not bland (Sandra Bullock in WHILE YOU WERE SLEEPING; Matthew McConaughey in HOW TO LOSE A GUY IN 10 DAYS; Hugh Grant in NOTTING HILL). *Homo jerkus* heroes are prickly but not irredeemable (Sandra Bullock in THE PROPOSAL; Matthew McConaughey in GHOSTS OF GIRLFRIENDS PAST; Hugh Grant in TWO WEEKS NOTICE).

Jerkus or otherwise, to maintain audience investment, it’s critical to follow this one rule: *the hero can never behave worse than the first impression he makes on the audience.*

If he’s a *homo likeabilis*, he can’t morph into a *jerkus*. If he’s a *jerkus*, he can, while still in the process of transformation, revert back to his unpleasant ways. But he can’t behave even more badly than the scenes which first introduce him.

If the likeable hero turns into a jerk, or the jerk becomes even jerkier, then audiences will start to emotionally divest from him. And once that connection is lost, it’s hard to get back.

So, in *AS GOOD AS IT GETS*, when Melvin encourages Carole to use her feminine wiles to turn Simon straight, we're not completely alienated. The crass remark is perfectly in keeping with our first impression of Melvin.

Likewise, in *NOTTING HILL*, even though Anna storms out of Will's flat in a petulant fit, we're nevertheless sad to see her lose the guy later on. Having witnessed her fiery temper and abrupt impetuosity on full display during our first introduction to her, we've grown accustomed to them, and decided to like her anyway. We can hardly judge her harshly for them now.

But a purely likeable hero has less latitude. To illustrate the point, we can take a look at the original screenplay for *HITCH*, written by Kevin Bisch. In this version of the story, Hitch manipulates a good-looking woman's insecurities in order to score a one-night stand.

In a sleazy voiceover, he explains his strategy: "In this case, the choreography was the classic SoHo two step: dismissal, quickly followed by awkward and embarrassed worship. Very powerful. Very effective on the model-actress-freelance fame junkie type who spend their days being tortured on castings. They're used to the rejection. They crave the approval."

Ewww. Trash bag alert!

Although brief, this scene put Hitch's likeability through the shredder. His dating tricks made him look clever before. But now, he comes across as callous and calculating—and undeserving of Sara's love. When the two of them break up, instead of offering Sara your sympathy, you'd be more likely to offer her your congratulations.

The movie wisely ditched this scene and maintained Hitch's likeability throughout. Sure, he's emotionally stunted and overly cynical, but those flaws are more likely to intrigue than alienate. In spite of them, Hitch is still very much a hero of the *homo likeabilis* mold. Consequently, when he and Sara do break up, it's hard not to feel bad for the guy.

In *HITCH*, deviating from the script helped enhance the protagonist's likeability. The same can't be said for *FOUR CHRISTMASSES*. In the original spec which was written by Matt Allen and Caleb Wilson, we meet the heroine, Kate, on Christmas Eve.

To get away from her divorced parents who're driving her crazy, she's taken refuge at a movie theater. But it's about to close—it requires a minimum of six patrons to stay open, and there's only five.

Enter Brad.

To quote the script, he's Kate's "knight in Gortex armor," who enables the movie theater to stay open on the holiday. Like Kate, he's seeking cinematic sanctuary from divorced parents who constantly bicker.

Hitting it off right away, they decide to abandon the theater and go someplace else. Because this reduces the total number of patrons to four, the ticket lady closes the theater, joyously exclaiming, "It's a Christmas miracle."

This might not be the most scintillating introduction in the world, but it works. It's enough to amuse us until the high-concept hook of experiencing four Christmases with four parental units in one day kicks into high gear.

Equally important, Kate and Brad come across as likeable protagonists, especially since they suffer from the "undeserved misfortune" of bickering parents.

The movie took an entirely different tack, which blew their likeability into smithereens. Our first impression of Kate is that she's a bitch. Our first impression of Brad is that he's a Neanderthal. Both impressions are wrong. They're merely playing games to spice up their love life.

In a romantic comedy with a darker tone, or in a movie of a different genre, this rather abrupt introduction wouldn't have been so damaging. But in frothy fare like *FOUR CHRISTMASSES*, it flops.

The opportunity to get audiences on board with the two protagonists has been squandered. This doesn't matter so much when comedy gags dominate the story (the installation of the satellite dish never fails to make me laugh), but when the movie switches gears and veers into emotional territory, the lack of protagonist likeability becomes a major problem.

If audiences are never on board with Kate and Brad to begin with (both as individuals and as a couple), then it's difficult

to care about their break-up and their eventual reunion. That emotional investment defines a romantic comedy. Since *FOUR CHRISTMASSES* doesn't inspire it, at a fundamental level, the film—despite its box office returns—fails as a rom-com.

This brings me to a key point. In the movie, Kate was played by Reese Witherspoon and Brad was played by Vince Vaughn. As actors, these two possess likeability in spades. But that, unfortunately, is not enough.

As a screenwriter, you can't solely rely on the actors' inherent charm to get audiences to care about the rift which will end Act Two. You have to pull your own weight.

You have to rely on your craft.

Give the actors' charisma something to work with. Think of it as a substrate of sorts.

Whether this entails saving cats or unleashing misfortune, it's up to you to ensure audiences become—and remain—emotionally invested in your rom-com hero and heroine.

Part V: In-Depth Case Studies

I've used examples throughout this writing guide to illustrate the fundamentals of the "all is lost" moment. However, oftentimes, to cement your understanding, it helps to apply all of these concepts to *one* movie. That's what I've tried to do with the eight case studies presented in this section.

Each of the blockbuster movies has been carefully selected because of how well it exemplifies the principles I've discussed so far. I've also chosen movies from a range of genres. If you know what kind of story you're writing, you might want to skip ahead to the case study from the same genre as yours.

Here's the complete list of movies and their corresponding genres:

SHERLOCK HOLMES 2: GAME OF SHADOWS (mystery, action, comedy)

BRIDESMAIDS (comedy)

ABOUT A BOY (comedy, drama)

MONSTERS, INC. (comedy, family)

OCEAN'S 11 (caper sub-genre)

A FEW GOOD MEN (drama)

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING (fantasy, action-adventure)

BRAVEHEART (drama, action)

Reading these case studies should give you an idea of exactly how much a well-written Act Two ending can accomplish. Hopefully, they will inspire you when you're plotting your own masterpiece!

SHERLOCK HOLMES 2: GAME OF SHADOWS

As the opening of the film tells us, a series of bombings has escalated tensions between various European nations. The majority of people believe anarchists are behind the acts of terrorism, but intrepid detective Sherlock Holmes knows better.

The true culprit is Professor Moriarty, “a mathematical genius, celebrated author and lecturer, boxing champion at Cambridge, and friend of England’s current prime minister.” Holmes is aided and abetted—reluctantly—by his best friend Watson, who’d rather be honeymooning in Brighton, and a mysterious gypsy, Madame “Sim” Simza, whose brother, unfortunately, has been caught in Moriarty’s complex web.

After a series of successes and setbacks, Holmes deduces that Moriarty will make his next move from Heilbronn, site of a weapons factory of which Moriarty has recently come into possession. There, Holmes is captured by Moriarty’s capable sidekick, Colonel Moran, who orders a pair of twin underlings to drug the detective.

Thus begins a sequence of physical and psychological agony as Moriarty tortures Holmes in order to elicit information about a telegram Watson had dispatched to Holmes’s brother some moments prior.

Hunted by the Colonel, Watson is also under duress, a situation made all the more intense because he can hear Holmes’s agonized screams over the factory loudspeakers. Eventually, Watson manages to elude Colonel Moran and save Holmes by collapsing a watchtower on top of the warehouse where Holmes is being tortured. “Always good to see you,” Holmes says to Watson upon the latter’s arrival—an understated testament not only to Holmes’s relief but also to their steadfast friendship.

From the ashes of this sequence, a new one begins. Action-heavy, it’s filled with machine gunfire and explosions. Intent on boarding a train racing through the nearby countryside, Holmes and his accomplices flee through a forest of thin black trees. Holmes, Watson, Sim, and one other gypsy successfully jump onto an empty train car.

However, the last remaining member of their group doesn’t make it. Just as he’s about to jump aboard the train, Colonel Moran shoots him. Although tragic, the loss of this ally has little impact because we barely know who he is. (In fact, if one of the gypsies hadn’t yelled it aloud as the victim fell to ground, I wouldn’t be able to tell you his name. It’s Marko, in case you’re curious.)

For a few seconds, as the train speeds through the snowy landscape, we believe that everyone inside the train car is safely recovering. But we’ve been tricked. Holmes’s condition is dire, and soon, he stops breathing.

Unprepared to face this loss, Watson expresses his grief by violently administering CPR and vehemently calling Holmes “a selfish bastard.” The contrast between Watson’s actions and societal expectations adds an ironic edge to the scene, managing to successfully convey the depth of Watson’s emotional pain, without veering into the trite and overly sentimental.

Unlike the death of Marko, this loss is devastating for several reasons. Naturally, since Holmes is the hero of the story, his death would have significant impact. Additionally, Holmes’s value to Watson—and to the story stakes—has been clearly established.

Throughout the film, we’re shown how meaningful Holmes and Watson’s friendship is to each other. Some cues include: Watson’s promise to Holmes’s housekeeper to take care of the detective; their silent communication at Watson’s wedding; their bickering on the train which should’ve conveyed Watson and his new bride to Brighton; and their banter over Holmes’s professed fondness for hedgehog goulash.

Furthermore, we also know how this setback jeopardizes the stakes. Having amassed the ability to manufacture everything from “bullets to bandages,” Moriarty plans to create demand for them by embroiling Europe in a world war.

By design, the crafty professor has covered his back in a thick cloak of respectability which shields him from accusation. No one—his victims, the police, European governments—sees through him. No one, that is, except for Sherlock Holmes. Now that Holmes is dead, Western civilization seems to be on the cusp of collapse.

If that were not all, the poignancy of Holmes’s death is also intensified by the aggregate of losses Holmes has endured

along the way. Torture. The death of Irene Adler, a woman whom he both loved and admired. The loss of Watson (through marriage). And the absence of a normal life of which his acute perceptiveness has deprived him. (As Holmes comments to Sim, he can see everything, and that is his curse.)

After suffering in these varied ways, it's unthinkable that Holmes must sacrifice his life too.

Or must he?

Eighteen minutes into the movie, as a wedding gift, Holmes bequeathed Watson a special restorative serum (extracted from the adrenal glands of sheep). Then, it revived Watson's poor dog whom Holmes uses as an experimental subject. Now, 76 minutes later, it brings Holmes back to life.

Since the serum and its efficacy were demonstrated beforehand, audience credibility monitors would not beep over Holmes's miraculous recovery, leaving audience members free to rejoice in the detective's resurrection.

Thankfully, Holmes's dance with death wasn't in vain. Paradoxically, it brought him closer to victory in two key ways. First, it enabled him to realize that Moriarty's twin underlings were not actually biological twins. When they drugged Holmes, he couldn't fail but to observe "the discreet but unmistakable puckering behind the ear." Holmes's suspicious were further aroused at the Heilbronn shootout, "when one [twin] failed to go to the aid of the other."

Because of these observations, Holmes realizes that, through surgical modifications, Moriarty is capable of making one man look exactly like another. And that is how the evil professor plans to use Sim's brother, René. He will assassinate a world leader at a Swiss peace summit.

But, René's face will no longer be his own. "What better way to guarantee a world war than to make the assassin..."—Holmes begins, leaving Watson to finish the train of thought—"...one of the ambassadors." Now that Holmes has gained this insight into Moriarty's plan, it is much easier for Holmes to thwart him. And this is indeed what happens during the film's climax.

Holmes's torture also accomplishes another, equally important, goal. It enables Holmes to get close enough to Moriarty to steal Moriarty's little red book, where the professor meticulously records intricate details concerning his fortune.

With the help of other characters, Holmes manages to destroy Moriarty's financial empire—a wonderful example of a hero inflicting damage to a psychic extension of the villain. Quite unsurprisingly, Moriarty doesn't take this blow well. He threatens to retaliate by killing Watson (and Watson's wife) using methods "most creative."

To prevent this highly undesirable outcome, Holmes tumbles into a waterfall—dragging Moriarty with him. Both plummet to their deaths. And if audiences harbored any doubts, the ensuing funeral would lay their skepticism to rest. But...they've been tricked once again.

For the second time, Holmes escapes another brush with death. On this occasion, he's saved by an oxygen-delivery device which had been ingeniously set up 22 minutes prior. Even though Holmes's death is used as a story beat during both the trough *and* the climax, no one seems to mind, perhaps because of the selflessness—so uncharacteristic of Holmes—the latter entailed. (The fact that it keeps the window open for another film is an added bonus.)

It should be noted that, typically, Holmes is portrayed as always having the upper hand. Because of the strength of his opponent, in this film, his usual invincibility is frequently supplanted by vulnerability. Some of these occasions include: when he requests Professor Moriarty to take Watson "out of the equation;" when Holmes kisses Irene Adler's handkerchief before tossing it into the ocean; when he confesses to Sim that his perceptiveness is his curse; and, of course, when he calmly embraces death in order to protect Watson from further harm.

Finally, SHERLOCK HOLMES 2: GAME OF SHADOWS benefitted greatly from its predecessor, which first established the burden of Holmes's superlative deductive abilities, his affection for Irene, and his loyalty to Watson. Even if they aren't consciously aware of it, fans of the first movie would have felt the impact of these scenes throughout the sequel, which would've intensified their emotional experience.

A powerful cumulative effect to keep in mind, should you ever snag an assignment to write an installment of a popular series!

BRIDESMAIDS

Things, to put it mildly, aren't going well in heroine Annie's life. A passionate baker, Annie invested all of her savings in her own bakery. Unfortunately, her business went under—and when it did, her boyfriend left her. Now, she works at a jewelry store. But she's such a bad saleswoman, she barely makes enough commission to pay her rent on time.

Speaking of rent, Annie's roommates consist of a peculiar pair of siblings, who read her diary and wear her clothes. The guy she's currently seeing is a selfish jerk, who treats her shabbily. In fact, the lone bright spot in Annie's life is her friendship with Lillian. Best friends since childhood, the two are inseparable.

However, change is on the horizon. When Lillian's boyfriend proposes to her, (much like Sherlock Holmes in *SHERLOCK HOLMES 1 and 2*), Annie realizes that this engagement is going to change everything. Her world a kilter, Annie's not well-prepared to meet one of Lillian's new friends, Helen.

Helen is everything that Annie is not: wealthy, refined...perfect. Annie's self-esteem, already fragile, can't handle this additional threat. As a protective mechanism, she tries to assert her "alpha-dog" position in Lillian's life. This, of course, only aggrandizes the problem, resulting in an extensive trough of hell sequence.

Even though Kristen Wiig, one half of the screenwriting duo behind *BRIDESMAIDS*, stars as Annie, as a writer, Wiig was cruel and merciless towards her character—exactly the way you should be towards your screenplay hero. Wiig and Annie Mumolo (the other half of the writing duo) do not stint on the pain, inflicting multiple cuts onto their heroine.

And, if that weren't enough, they often add lines of dialogue to throw salt on Annie's wounds to make them sting even more. Annie may not have been captured, or tortured, or brought to the brink of death, but she was most certainly treated with sadistic hands, which inflicted wounds appropriate for the film's rating and genre.

To begin with, when the bridesmaids fly to Las Vegas for Lillian's bachelorette party (Helen's idea), Annie freaks out on the flight, eventually getting the plane grounded in Wyoming. Forbidden from flying, the girls must take the bus back to Wisconsin.

Inflicting the first cut, Lillian relieves Annie of the latter's maid of honor duties. "About the shower...it has been really overwhelming for you...it's just starting to make you crazy...and we need things to flow smoothly from now on, and Helen just knows how to do this kind of stuff. I think it'll be best, here on out, for the shower...and everything."

Although this demotion hurts Annie badly, she and Lillian remain friends. In other words, while this setback is painful, it's a "trough lite," a milder version of the major alienation soon to ensue. Still, it's enough to drive Annie into the arms of Officer Rhodes, a genuinely nice guy who treats Annie with the respect she deserves. Because of poor self-esteem, Annie's been resistant to his charms, but the brouhaha with Lillian has caused her to change course.

Throughout the film, Rhodes has encouraged Annie to rekindle her passion for baking. Imagining that they will spend the morning baking together, he even goes out to the supermarket in order to supply her with the proper ingredients. But his sweet gesture backfires spectacularly. Proclaiming that she "doesn't need him to fix her," Annie storms out of his apartment. Whatever was blossoming between the two is definitely over.

The cause of this rift is notable because of how unique it is to this particular story. In another movie, if a guy asked a girl to bake with him, that request wouldn't cause their relationship to implode. (Think of *IT'S COMPLICATED*. When Adam confesses to Jane that he has "the munchies," they drive to Jane's bakery, where she whips up a mouthwatering batch of chocolate croissants. As a matter of fact, the activity of baking brings these two characters closer together.)

Not so with Annie and Rhodes. Like Jane, Annie's invested a lot of her identity into her passion for baking. But unlike Jane, Annie's investment resulted in failure, not success. This failure undercuts her sense of identity so deeply that she avoids baking to protect herself from experiencing that kind of pain ever again.

Therefore, when Rhodes pressures Annie to bake, he's opening an old psychic wound which Annie would much rather pretend didn't exist. Terrified, she puts the brakes on what looked like a very promising relationship.

As a side note, in one early scene, long before her break-up with Officer Rhodes, Annie secretly bakes one cupcake. Laden with frosting and carefully sculpted fondant, it's a work of art. I love that little throwaway scene because it reflects

a truth about human existence: real talent can't be suppressed. Even if you, like Annie, try to contain it, this gift is an essential part of you, and it will always find a way to bubble up past your boundaries and manifest itself.

Soon after the bust-up with Rhodes, Annie receives an invitation to Lillian's bridal shower. Again, in another movie, this wouldn't be a big deal. But within the context of this story, the Parisian-themed invitation is a full-fledged assault on Annie's identity as Lillian's best friend.

As a matter of fact, Annie was the one who had originally suggested the Parisian theme because she knew Lillian had always dreamed of going to Paris. As Lillian's best friend, as Lillian's first choice for maid of honor, it should've been Annie sending out those invitations. Not Helen, who had the gall to steal Annie's idea and pass it off as her own, even though Helen had initially dismissed a Parisian theme as "been there, done that."

Overwrought by these developments, Annie's in no mood to deal with her customers at the jewelry store. When a teenage girl wants to buy a "best friends forever" necklace, Annie tries to dissuade her by claiming friendship is only fleeting. This, by the way, is a good example of using subtext to reveal a character's emotional state.

While the content of Annie's dialogue centers on a jewelry purchase, what Annie's really saying is that she's hurt by the way Helen is supplanting Annie's position in Lillian's life. In the end, Annie and the teenage girl get into a verbal sparring match which comes to an abrupt halt when Annie says something unspeakably rude—effecting another wound in Annie's series of cuts.

Annie's boss fires her on the spot. Critically, this setback doesn't undercut Annie's sense of identity—not the way losing her bakery did. Because Annie views this job as merely a means to an end, it doesn't hurt her psychically. But since it does complicate her ability to pay her bills, it does cause her psychological distress.

At the end of the scene, Annie begs her boss to let her be the one who breaks the news to her mom (who had gotten Annie the job in the first place). Throwing salt on Annie's wound, her boss replies that he already has. With that brief exchange, the painful humiliation of the moment is further intensified.

When Annie returns to her apartment, she's greeted with another distressing development. In a wonderful example of using banishment as a "topper," Annie's sibling roommates (Gil and Brynn) oust Annie from the premises. "We like to invite you to no longer live with us anymore." This setback would be troublesome all on its own, but it's doubly humiliating because they're such awful roommates, who read her diary, wear her clothes, and don't contribute their fair portion of rent. Annie should really be the one banishing *them*.

As if this humiliation doesn't sting enough, Brynn finds a way to throw salt on the wound. In a gesture of solace, she rubs Annie's leg, then quickly retracts her hand, commenting, "Oh, that's prickly!" Annie hasn't just lost her digs. Apparently, to Brynn, she's also a disgrace to good feminine grooming.

As a result of Annie's double dose of banishment (getting fired from the jewelry store and getting ousted from her apartment), Annie has to move back in with her mom. From a callback to an earlier line of dialogue about "hitting rock bottom," we know that this is truly a low point for Annie.

Although Annie's been attacked on multiple fronts, she still forges ahead—that is, until, the day of the bridal shower. Using many of Annie's original ideas, Helen has transformed her lavish home into a Parisian wonderland. During the opening of the presents, it first seems like Annie will be able to salvage her friendship with Lillian. Annie gives Lillian a collage filled with shared memories and a basket containing treasures from Lillian's favorite stores in Milwaukee.

Overwhelmed by Annie's thoughtfulness, Lillian thanks Annie warmly. But then, Helen upstages Annie, gifting the bride with a trip to Paris. For Annie, this is the last straw.

Filled with resentment, she goes into meltdown mode. She and Lillian exchange harsh words, which seem to cut all the deeper because of the way they sharply contrast with the positive moment which preceded them.

Interestingly, Annie vents her frustrations onto a massive heart-shaped cookie, several cake stands, and a giant chocolate fountain. By destroying these desserts, it's as if Annie were trying to destroy psychic extensions of Helen as well as the perfection Helen represents.

Emotionally devastated, Annie storms out of Helen's house. The rift between Annie and Lillian—caused by two interlopers, Helen and Annie's own insecurities—is now complete.

The scene could've ended here, but true to form, goes one step further. Lillian throws salt on Annie's already painful wound, and denies her former best friend a party favor—an adorable golden retriever puppy. And then, in the coup de grace, Lillian rescinds her invitation to her wedding.

Like Annie and Lillian, audiences keenly feel the loss of this friendship because the film clearly depicts its value to both women. From the very beginning, it's clear these two have known—and loved—each other for a very long time.

For example, their affection for each other is shown both in the way the two try to scam free workouts from an outdoor fitness instructor as well as the way they candidly discuss their boyfriends with each other. During one of her many toasts at Lillian's engagement party, Annie says that Lillian has “molded who I am,” and that “she's like a sister to me.”

Annie's rivalry with Helen, which ultimately ends Annie and Lillian's friendship, ironically proves just how meaningful this friendship is to Annie. She wouldn't be so protective of it, if she didn't value it so much. In my opinion, the movie's honest portrayal of female friendship—and not its raunchy hijinks—was the foremost cause of its spectacular box office success.

When Annie leaves the engagement party, she brakes hard to avoid hitting a porcupine crossing the street. As a result, she ends up in an accident—bringing her into contact with Officer Rhodes. In another example of subtext, he reminds Annie to get her taillights fixed. He may be talking about Annie's automobile, but what he's really saying is that she hurt him. Badly.

Theoretically, if Annie took Rhodes's subtext-filled speech to heart, it could've been enough to push Annie into her post-trough realization. But she's not yet ready to hear his message; her wounds are too fresh.

Later, Annie doesn't exactly become receptive to well-meaning advice. But Megan, sister of Lillian's husband-to-be, won't take “no” for an answer. Becoming Annie's “messenger,” she browbeats Annie—literally—into listening. Slapping and punching Annie, Megan yells at her, “to fight back at life.”

Megan then relates her own tragic tale. In high school, kids used to throw firecrackers at her head. But Megan didn't let that bring her down. She studied hard, and now she works for the government—having earned the highest possible security clearance. She concludes her pep talk with the following advice: “Now, you got to stop feeling sorry for yourself. ‘Cause I do not associate with people who blame the world for their problems. ‘Cause you're your problem, Annie. And you're also your solution.”

Intriguingly, Megan wasn't the character who originally brought about Annie's post-trough realization. In an interview with Scott Myers, rom-com expert [Billy Mernit shares the behind-the-scenes scoop](#) about the script's development: “Speaking of casting, the emergence of Melissa McCarthy [who played Megan] as the gift that kept on giving had a lot to do with solving what had always been a key problem in the project's story development: triggering and articulating Annie's big epiphany. For the longest time, Wiig and Mumolo couldn't seem to get a handle on this; they kept throwing the moment to other characters, including some who were entirely extraneous to the plot. Once Megan became such a fun character, it was almost a ‘Duh!’ that she be the one who literally slaps Annie into awareness (‘I'm life! Am I bothering you? Life bothering you? C'mon, take a swing at me!’) McCarthy KILLS with this stuff.”

As intended, Megan's visit does the trick, propelling Annie into action. She gets her taillights fixed. She recovers her baking mojo, even making a carrot cake as an apology to Rhodes. After a change in circumstances, Helen actually begs for Annie's help. Eventually, Annie and Lillian repair their rift.

Echoing Annie's realization at the film's beginning, Lillian finally accepts that her wedding is going to change everything. Still, despite these changes, Annie shares her own hard-won insight: she's going to be just fine. With that knowledge, Annie reclaims her rightful position as Lillian's maid of honor—and best friend.

If Annie and Lillian had mended their relationship at the bridal shower, audiences would've been deprived of a third act—and a wonderful cameo performance by Wilson Phillips (singing a thematically-relevant hit song no less). But that's not the real reason Annie and Lillian's relationship had to break, before, paradoxically, it could be strengthened.

If Annie hadn't managed to get the upper hand over Helen at least once, their feud would've become a “bubble,” posing an ever-constant threat to Annie and Lillian's friendship. Now, that bubble's been wedged out, enabling Annie to stop engaging in destructive protective measures.

Through a casual conversation at the film's beginning, it's revealed that Annie's dad left her and her mother behind to

start a new life with a second wife (a backstory which had more weight in an old draft of the screenplay). Although it's never directly stated in the film, her dad's absence may've been one reason why Annie relied so heavily on Lillian's friendship. (Incidentally, this detail also enhances the emotional impact of its loss. Lillian's rejection of Annie echoes the abandonment Annie likely experienced at the hands of her dad.)

Simply put: Lillian is Annie's crutch. If Annie had never lost Lillian's friendship, Annie would've been content with her lackluster existence and never would've taken any measures to change it. Ultimately, in the long run, the one-sidedness of the friendship would've destroyed it.

However, by losing Lillian, Annie was motivated to turn around her life. Thus, Annie will be able to give Lillian as much support as Lillian gives her, cementing their status as BFFs.

Note: for a comedy, especially, Annie's trough of hell is quite extensive. Beginning with Annie's demotion to a regular bridesmaid, and ending with Annie and Lillian becoming thoroughly alienated from one another, it takes up approximately 20 minutes of screentime. It's certainly not compressed with regard to time or location.

Still, it works, largely because *the humor was never left behind for the sake of sentiment*. At the same time, the comic gags and verbal quips weren't included just to increase the film's comedy quotient. Not only do they advance the story forward, they also give voice to compelling truths about the nature of friendship and personal responsibility.

ABOUT A BOY

Will Lightman, the protagonist of this dramatic comedy, is not really a likeable hero. He's selfish. He's emotionally stunted. He preys upon single mothers by pretending to be a single parent himself. And yet, audiences don't completely disengage from Will.

They want to see what happens to him, and they're sympathetic towards him when his trough of hell finally does strike. The movie manages to accomplish this difficult feat through a combination of methods. For starters, there's Will's blasé attitude towards life, which is broken down into half an hour units. "Taking a bath: one unit. Watching COUNTDOWN: one unit. Web-based research: two units. Exercising: three units. Having my hair carefully disheveled: four units."

Will claims he's doing great with his sterile, vacuous existence, but other characters disagree. As an ex-girlfriend points out to him, "I wouldn't say you're okay. I would say you're a disaster. What is the point of your life?"

While Will may be all smug about "living like an island," audiences counter that vein of smugness with their own. Will, they conclude, couldn't possibly be satisfied with this superficial existence. Not when his closest relationships appear to be with his DVD player and his espresso machine. Assured of that, audiences anticipate the moment when Will will come to that realization on his own. That's just one reason why audiences stick around to see what happens to Will even though his thoughts and actions are fairly alienating.

There are other factors at work too. At the beginning of the film, before he hatches his plan to fabricate fatherhood, Will is dumped by a single mother—a bit of "undeserved misfortune." Despite the fact that Will was planning to break up with her anyway, the scene still elicits sympathy for Will, primarily because he flashes back to a slew of past break-up scenes, when he was the dater doing the dumping. In the last one, his just-dumped girlfriend accuses him of being "a superficial loser." Although Will appears unmoved by the comment, audiences get the sense that the barb cut deep.

Then, when Will embarks on his plan to prey on single mothers, everything backfires spectacularly. He expects to encounter tons of gorgeous moms at a support group for single parents (SPAT: Single Parents Alone Together), but, with the exception of Suzie, the moms are an unattractive bunch.

Will succeeds in scoring a date with Suzie, but again, things don't go according to plan. Suzie has invited Marcus, a precocious twelve-year-old boy and the son of another SPAT member, to tag along. Because Will's plans do go awry, because he experiences a bit of *deserved* misfortune, audiences are willing to partake of Will's journey.

If that were not all, the movie goes one step further to seal the deal. On Will's date with Suzie, Marcus accidentally kills a duck by hurling a loaf of his mother's atrocious homemade bread into a pond. When a park official comes over to investigate, Will covers for Marcus, claiming that the boy was only trying to submerge the duck's body in the water because the sight of it was disturbing Suzie's young daughter.

In other words, Will has "saved the cat." And so, when the story begins in earnest, audiences are invested in Will. He's not exactly a likeable bloke, but nevertheless, audiences are keen to see what happens to him.

When Marcus returns home after his outing to the park, he discovers that his mom has tried to commit suicide. Thankfully, she survives. But Marcus knows that she might try again, and he can't watch her all the time. He concludes that he needs "backup," and with the stubbornness of a child, he latches onto the idea of Will being his surrogate father.

Marcus has a solid plan to achieve his goal too. Having followed Will around the city, Marcus knows that Will was merely pretending to be a single dad. At first, Marcus tries to use this information as a bargaining chip. Marcus won't unmask Will to anyone if Will agrees to date Marcus's mother. Unwilling to go through such lengths to maintain the ruse of fatherhood, Will refuses point-blank. Nevertheless, Marcus manages to weasel his way into Will's life. Slowly, the mismatched pair becomes friends.

Marcus's advent brings another meaningful relationship into Will's life: Rachel. Unfortunately, unlike Will's relationship with Marcus, Will's relationship with Rachel is built on a pretense. Will met Rachel on New Year's Eve, and found her to be "interesting and smart and attractive. For five minutes, I had her convinced that I was too."

But when those five minutes were up, Will couldn't keep her interest. Not by sticking to the truth anyway. He snagged her attention once more by mentioning that he knew a kid who loved rap music.

Assuming that Will was talking about his own son, Rachel, as a mother of a young boy herself, became engaged again by what Will had to say. To his credit, Will didn't mean to capture her interest through intentional falsehood. To his discredit, however, he doesn't correct her mistaken assumption, even going so far as to conniving Marcus into pretending to be his biological son when they visit Rachel's home together. (This, incidentally, is a good example of a hero turning a mark into an ally in order to maintain his pretense.)

Although he helped Will out, Marcus isn't satisfied with the situation, and he goads Will into telling Rachel the truth. Reluctantly, Will comes clean. He is not Marcus's biological parent; he doesn't have a child at all. The fact that Will unmasks himself, instead of being "outed" by some other character, weighs in his favor—at least to audience members. It doesn't seem to matter to Rachel at all, and her blossoming relationship with Will comes to an abrupt halt.

Interestingly, Rachel only enters Will's life about halfway through the film and exits it approximately 13 minutes later. Because she doesn't have much screentime, in another film, her loss would likely carry little emotional weight. Yet, in this movie, her break-up with Will does have emotional impact because the movie clearly establishes how meaningful Rachel is to Will.

In his words, "SPAT was for fun. This was different." He even confesses to Marcus that he'd like Rachel to be his girlfriend. For a normal man, this desire would come across as rather mundane. But for Will, who treats women like disposable razors, this desire is extraordinary. Most importantly of all, Will admits to himself that he'd be content if he and Rachel only shared emotional—as opposed to physical—intimacy, a declaration which reinforces her significance to him.

Clearly, Will would be in great emotional pain after losing someone whom he cares about so much. But there are other pain types layered into this break-up scene which also intensify its impact. Once Will has spilled the beans, he experiences some psychological distress as he attempts to talk himself out of his predicament. In contrast to an earlier argument with Marcus's mother, he can't claim the moral high ground, and as a result, can't defend himself so self-righteously.

But the worst of it, for Will, is the psychic pain he experiences as his identity is reduced to nothing. Rachel confesses that the first time she met Will, "I thought you were a bit 'blank.' Then you changed my mind. But maybe I was right." Negating his own self, Will concurs. Rachel was correct in her original assessment. "I am nothing," he says, his voice filled with self-loathing.

It's a tremendous low point, which only gets worse. When Marcus seeks out Will because Marcus's mother appears to be on the verge of another downward spiral, Will reverts back to his selfish ways. Still consumed by his own heartbreak, Will treats Marcus's serious problem with apathetic indifference.

At first Marcus doesn't get it. But, gradually, he comes to accept the truth. Although Marcus wholeheartedly believed otherwise, Will can't commit to being a reliable, responsible adult. Alienated and hurting, Marcus stalks off, exiting Will's life for good.

Simply by virtue of screentime, Marcus's rift with Will would have emotional impact on audiences. Unlike Rachel, who made her first appearance close to the tail end of Act Two, Marcus was part of the story from the very beginning. But to create this moment of profound emotional impact, the movie doesn't rely upon screentime alone. It clearly establishes Marcus's significance to Will, whose genuine affection for the boy reveals itself in small, but identifiable ways.

When Marcus begins to drop by Will's apartment uninvited, Marcus has to use the doorbell as a form of auditory torture in order to gain admittance. Over time, Will starts to open his door before Marcus even has a chance to ring the bell.

When Will buys Marcus a pair of expensive sneakers without the expectation of receiving anything in return, the man who proudly claimed he was "an island unto himself," experiences a natural high.

Additionally, Will has always blown off celebrating Christmas, but when Marcus invites Will to spend the holiday with him, Will not only accepts, but to his surprise, feels "warm and fuzzy" during the festivities.

Marcus and, to a lesser extent, Rachel, have both awakened Will's capacity to experience genuine emotion. That's another reason why losing them hurts Will so much. Past experience has taught him it's wiser to close himself off from others, to live a sterile existence "with no one to keep him afloat." That way, he can't be hurt the way he was by an alcoholic father and by a manipulative mother who used to force him to sing his dad's one hit wonder in front of their inebriated relatives.

Now, prodded by Marcus's earnestness, Will has taken a chance and opened up his heart, only to be abandoned the way he had been in the past. Like John Beckwith in *WEDDING CRASHERS*, he's fashioned a new family of sorts for himself, which he's now lost through his own missteps and wrong actions.

Throughout the film, Will has asserted that he leads a full existence. However, during his post-trough realization, he acknowledges that his shallow, selfish life "didn't mean anything...the fact was...there was only one thing that meant something to me. Marcus. He was the only thing that meant something to me. And Fiona [Marcus's mother] was the only thing that meant something to him...and she was about to fall off the edge." (Note that Will's insight emphasizes once more how valuable Marcus's affection is to Will.)

In another movie, Will's "on the nose" dialogue would've come across as melodramatic and trite. But because this kind of frank, vulnerable admission is completely uncharacteristic of Will, it feels meaningful. In an alternate version of the film, Will could've been pushed into his realization by another character. Suzie, for instance. But since Will makes his realization on his own, his "aha" moment is all the more powerful, underscoring his character growth.

Will's realization and decision to help Marcus's mother set into motion a climax in which Will wins back both Marcus and Rachel. Therein lies the paradox. If Will had never confessed the truth to Rachel, their relationship might have dragged on for a few more weeks, but his deception was bound to come to light sooner or later. The longer he delays, the less likely she'd be to ever forgive him. His chance at a genuine, "grown-up" romantic relationship would vanish entirely.

At the same time, for this relationship to truly succeed, Rachel has to accept Will for who he is—a redeemed reprobate, but a former reprobate all the same. To put it another way, Will and Rachel's break-up has wedged out "the bubbles" which could've destroyed their relationship for good, paradoxically bringing them closer than ever.

Likewise, Will's rift with Marcus was also necessary to strengthen their relationship. Without it, Will would perennially relegate himself to the role of the "cool" uncle, the person "who's really good at choosing trainers [sneakers] or records," the kind of person who can't help Marcus "with anything that means anything." Their temporary alienation forces Will to become something more—to become the reliable, responsible adult Marcus (and audiences) always suspected him capable of being.

In sum, losing Rachel and Marcus was the best thing that could've ever happened to Will. Without experiencing these losses, he'd never make that final transition from man-child to man. Without them, he'd never be desperate enough to abandon living like an island and fight for the authentic relationships he truly craves.

MONSTERS, INC.

In the world of this movie, monsters are terrified of children, whom they've been trained to believe are "toxic and deadly." Just a single touch could kill an unsuspecting monster. Nevertheless, employees of Monsters, Inc. risk their well-being, night after night, in order to scare screams out of human children.

It's necessary to accumulate such screams because they fuel the city's power grid. And our hero, James "Sulley" Sullivan, is the best "scarer" there is, the pride and joy of Monsters, Inc. With the help of Mike, his best friend and assistant, Sulley's well on his way to breaking the company's all-time scare record.

However, Sulley and Mike's careful plans go awry when a child from the human world inadvertently ends up in their own. Spoon-fed propaganda, they're both terrified of her. Gradually, Sulley warms up to the endearing little girl. As the film progresses, she becomes increasingly more meaningful to him, (and he becomes increasingly protective of her).

The significance of this bond is demonstrated through a variety of ways, including: Sulley's delight in the picture the girl drew of both of them; his entranced expression when he watches her finally falling asleep; his joy in their game of hide and seek; and perhaps, most importantly of all, his decision to give her a name—Boo. As Mike astutely points out, "You're not supposed to name it. Once you name it, you start getting attached to it!"

When Boo (clad in a homemade monster costume) runs off and disappears into the environs of the scare factory, Mike is overjoyed. "She's out of our hair!" he exclaims. He and Sulley are off the hook; they can let someone else worry about getting Boo back home. Sulley feels differently. Because he's come to truly care for Boo, he can't pass the buck onto someone else.

Against Mike's exhortations not to, Sulley chases after her, a decision which initializes Sulley's extensive trough of hell. He observes Boo climbing into a garbage can, but critically, doesn't witness her scrambling out of it. When a janitor deposits the can's contents into a garbage chute, Sulley sees a remnant of Boo's costume poking out of it, and mistakenly concludes that she's been accidentally sent to the trash compactor. Aghast, he watches the compactors go about their business, compressing the trash into tiny cubes.

Believing he's lost Boo for good, Sulley faints. When he recovers, he tenderly cradles the cube of trash which contains the remnant of Boo's costume. Sobbing, he explains what happened to Mike. The extent of Sulley's grief again reinforces how valuable Boo has become to Sulley, a state of affairs which is especially noteworthy since he originally viewed her as a toxic vermin.

Happily, Sulley soon discovers that Boo is still alive. This raises an important point. While Sulley was tricked into believing Boo had been compacted into a cube of trash, *audiences were not*.

They had witnessed Boo crawling out of the trash can before the janitor had emptied it. This choice is significant not only because of Boo's age but also because of the age of the target audience. Children and adults alike would've been extremely distressed if they thought Boo had become compacted into trash—even if their mistaken assumption would be later revealed to be false—and the movie likely wouldn't have achieved its impressive level of success.

Sulley's relief to see Boo safe and sound, although immense, is short-lived. (In fact, its contrast with ensuing events deepens the emotional impact of these later setbacks.) Sulley's arch-nemesis, Randall, has been involved in some dodgy activity. Now, Sulley—and audiences—learn what Randall's nefarious schemes entail.

Having devised a machine which extracts screams from its victims by brute force, Randall intends to use it on little Boo. Fortunately for Boo (and unfortunately for Mike), Randall captures Mike instead of the girl and plans to extract screams from him in lieu of Boo.

Thankfully, Sulley manages to rescue Mike just in the nick of time. Terrified and unsure what to do, Mike and Sulley (who's carrying Boo) flee through the corridors of Monsters, Inc. It seems they've run out of options—until an off-hand comment by Mike gives Sulley the perfect answer.

All their problems will be solved once they tell everything to Sulley's boss, Mr. Watnoose. But Sulley's decision to confess all to the eight-legged CEO of Monsters, Inc. has unforeseen consequences. Watnoose reveals himself to be Sulley's foe, someone who not only knew about Randall's venal tactics all along but also fully supported them.

Mr Waternoose's about-face isn't a complete shock; there was always something a little creepy about his eight legs and overly jolly demeanor. Still, Sulley believed in Waternoose implicitly. Because of his faith in Waternoose, audiences would be unlikely to suspect Waternoose of such duplicity. This faith is also precisely why Waternoose's deception is so devastating to Sulley.

Waternoose isn't just Sulley's boss; he was Sulley's mentor too, teaching young Sulley the classic "jump and growl" scare tactic. (In Part I, we covered how the nature of this mentor-mentee relationship amplifies Sulley's pain, so I won't dwell on it here.)

Furthermore, Sulley hasn't just given his loyalty to Waternoose, he's also given it to Monsters, Inc. When Mr Waternoose avows that he would do anything to prevent the company from going under, Sulley replies, "So would I, sir." Later, when Boo's presence threatens to destroy Sulley's and Mike's dreams, Mike worries about their futures. Sulley, however, is more concerned about how this situation could destroy the company.

This conversation highlights the way Sulley places the needs of Monsters, Inc. above his own. In other words, Sulley's identity isn't just invested in being the best scarer in Monstropolis, it's invested in being the best scarer *working on behalf of Monsters, Inc.* Consequently, when Sulley discovers that this company is actually corrupt from top to bottom, this blow is going to affect him on a psychic level.

That's not even the worst of it. When Waternoose discovers that Sulley and Mike have discovered the truth about the company's shady business practices, the CEO banishes them to the Himalayas. Observe that this banishment strikes the appropriate chord of hopelessness without verging into territory too dark for the film's G-rating.

It also proves to be the last straw for Mike, and his friendship with Sulley disintegrates into the bitter Himalayan winds. Mike's upset for a number of reasons, primary of which is Sulley's devotion to Boo. "You ruined my life, and for what?" Mike rhetorically asks Sulley. "A stupid kid. Because of you, I am now stuck in this frozen wasteland!"

It's a wonderful—and unusual—example of social alienation caused through interference from a third party, which typically manifests as a love triangle. There's a triangle at work here too, but one of an entirely different nature. (It's actually a very good model to emulate if your screenplay is about two friends, one of whom is growing up and leaving the other behind.)

Although the prequel *MONSTERS UNIVERSITY* altered the timeline of Sulley and Mike's friendship, originally, Sulley and Mike were best friends since the fourth grade. Indeed, their friendship is so strong, that instead of being resentful of living in Sulley's oversized shadow, Mike is Sulley's ever-enthusiastic assistant.

Devoid of jealousy, he takes pleasure in bringing Sulley closer to their goal of breaking the all-time scare record. Of course, their rift is going to cause Sulley a great deal of emotional pain. Even so, this pales in comparison to the distress Sulley feels on behalf of Boo, who's now in Waternoose's custody, because Sulley put his trust into a fraud.

Naturally, Sulley's upset that it's his fault Boo is currently in Waternoose's clutches. But his pain goes beyond that. Earlier, right before he confessed everything to Mr Waternoose, Sulley was forced to participate in a scare simulation. In the process, he terrified Boo. From her point of view, *he* transformed from friend to foe.

When Sulley observes his "monster face" on recording monitors, he doesn't like what he sees. Like *ABOUT A BOY*'s Marcus, Boo has compelled Sulley to take stock of his life and assess who he is. And much like Will Lightman, when Sulley completes this evaluation, he's filled with self-loathing. "Did you see the way she looked at me?" he despairingly asks Mike.

Fortunately, Sulley doesn't remain out of commission for long. Thanks to a casual comment made by the Abominable Snowman, Sulley realizes there's a way to get back to Monstropolis and save Boo. This realization sets into motion a humorous action set piece, which perfectly illustrates how the complications produced by the banishment trough type can make a story more entertaining to audiences.

In the end, Sulley is successful. He rescues Boo and returns her to her bedroom in the human world. Paradoxically, his previous failure to save her brings about an even greater benefit. Because of it, Sulley—and an undercover investigative agent—discover Waternoose's corruption, paving the way for Waternoose's removal.

With Sulley at the helm of Monsters, Inc., monsters no longer terrify children around the world. Instead, they generate power for Monstropolis by eliciting a reaction ten times more powerful than a scream—laughter.

Speaking of laughter, even during Sulley's darkest moments, *MONSTERS, INC.* abounds in humor. The movie is chockfull of gags, many of which center around each monster's uniquely gross features. The gloom of Sulley and Mike's banishment is enlivened by interjections made by the Abominable Snowman. Almost every line out of Mike's mouth is some kind of quip. This comic tone is maintained throughout Sulley's extensive trough, which is neither compressed in space nor time.

Yet, in this particular movie, the lack of compression works. For one thing, the younger members of the target audience would delight in changes in scenery. Limiting Sulley's trough to one location would have likely bored them. More importantly, each comedy gag—and each of Sulley's trough of hell “cuts” for that matter—push the story forward, while maintaining its momentum.

Although it is indeed a comic triumph, the movie's greatest strength lies in depicting the developing bond between Sulley and Boo. Their relationship fuels the core of the film, elevating it into something truly magical, and creating an experience which will delight children and adults alike for years to come.

OCEAN'S 11 (2001)

Having been released from prison, con artist Danny Ocean's first act as a free man is to plan a heist. Not just any heist, but the mother of all heists: stealing millions from three—count 'em—three casinos, all of which are owned by Las Vegas mogul Terry Benedict.

Benedict's no random mark, either. He's been chosen as a target because he's now dating Danny's ex-wife, Tess. (We'll get into why this detail is so important at the end of this case study.)

To achieve this feat, Danny must recruit a large crew—the eponymous Ocean's 11. So far, our case study analysis has largely focused on the troughs endured by the hero of the story. Since OCEAN'S 11 is an ensemble film, it's more helpful to change our approach and start to examine the individual troughs each con artist experiences.

With so many “mini-troughs,” (some of which have multiple parts), the film, quite unsurprisingly, employs multiple techniques to weave them together—primarily advanced trough techniques #2 and #5, purposeful misdirection and dividing & conquering, respectively. With regards to the latter, observe that just as much creativity was put into the formation of Ocean's team as in the con itself.

Note, too, that the location of the heist—the Bellagio—is the perfect setting to employ the divide and conquer technique. Its vastness enables the story action to be disbursed across multiple fronts such as the casino floors, the casino cages, the casino security center, the casino hotel suites, and of course, the casino vault.

Intercutting between each front maintains a lively pace—and audience engagement. If Ocean's crew of con men had stuck together during the heist, it would've been far less entertaining to watch (and perhaps rather illogical too).

Without further ado, let's look at these troughs in action, starting with Ocean's explosives expert, Basher:

Basher: When a demolition crew destroys an old casino, they—to use Basher's parlance—“nause up the mainframe.” This, in turn, makes the city aware of a weakness Basher was hoping to exploit in order to get Danny inside the Bellagio's vault. Without this weakness, the crew is pretty much screwed. Consumed by psychological distress, Basher conveys this devastating development to Ocean's 11.

Fortunately, his distress doesn't last long, and Basher soon arrives at an alternative solution: they'll use a pinch, a device “which creates a cardiac arrest for any broadband electrical circuitry.” While the con men succeed in stealing a pinch from a nearby university, unfortunately, in the process, Yen's hand becomes injured. (This will lead to its own set of complications later on.)

Danny (Part I) and Rusty: Livingston Dell informs Danny that Danny has been red-flagged by casino security. The moment Danny enters the Bellagio, “they'll be watching. Like hawks. Hawks with video cameras.” After this setback, Danny and Rusty argue over whether Danny can stay on the con.

Their friendship seems to have hit the skids. Rusty's upset with Danny for allowing Danny's obsession with Tess to jeopardize their heist. Or, to put it another way, for choosing love over work.

Meanwhile, Danny's upset with Rusty for having the gall to try to oust Danny from the job Danny had planned. Or, to put it another way, he's upset that Rusty has broken the unwritten code between con artists. To add insult to injury, Rusty elects Linus—green behind the ears Linus—to replace Ocean.

Like Yen's injury, Danny's red flag will create more complications later on. This is just one of the many tricks to steal from the OCEAN'S 11 playbook: have the heroes themselves make it even harder for them to accomplish their goal.

In this particular case, Danny actually made things harder on himself on purpose. He wanted to get red-flagged. (You'll see why in just a bit.) His fight with Rusty is just a bit of misdirection, staged mostly for Linus's benefit...and, of course, to enhance audience enjoyment.

Saul (Part I): Posing as international arms dealer, Mr Lyman Zerga, Saul is almost unmasked by a former—and extremely tanned—acquaintance. “Saul! Saul Bloom, is that you?” he asks, as Saul makes his way through the casino floor, accompanied by none other than Terry Benedict. “Saul! Saul! It's me! Bucky Buchanan,” he continues, oblivious.

“Remember? From Saratoga!” Fortunately, two of Ocean’s crew (the Malloy twins), haul Bucky away before he can inflict further damage.

Linus (Part I): Now it’s Linus’s turn to step up to the plate. Pretending to be an employee of the Nevada Gaming Commission, he tells Benedict that they have a problem. For a moment, it seems like Benedict has seen through Linus’s deception. “You been at the Commission long?” he casually asks Linus. “You know Hal Lindley? Worked with him at all?” Linus, however, sidesteps this landmine with admirable aplomb. “Not since he died last year,” he replies. Observe that Benedict’s suspicion doesn’t just increase the tension; it also makes him a stronger opponent. And *both* effects make for a more engaging story.

Danny (Part II): Even though he’s red-flagged, in a seemingly self-destructive move, Danny enters the Bellagio and seeks out Tess. She doesn’t greet him warmly. “I want you out of here. Don’t say you came here for me. You’re pulling a job, aren’t you? Well, know this: no matter what it is, you won’t win me back.”

Although her rejection must’ve hurt him, Danny hides it well, murmuring that he’s just come to say good-bye. In actuality, Danny approached Tess in order to plant a cell phone into her coat pocket. At the end, this cell phone will play a key part in Ocean’s exit strategy.

The Malloy Twins: Disguised in casino uniforms, the immature siblings saunter through the casino gaming floor, pushing a cash cart which contains Yen, “the grease man.” But when they reach the elevators, Virgil Malloy can’t locate the card he needs to access the elevator. As a result, Turk starts to yell at his brother.

For just a second, it seems like Virgil’s immaturity may’ve completely wrecked the con. But, in truth, this is another deployment of misdirection. The siblings manufactured their distress on purpose. To stop their bickering, a real employee of the Bellagio volunteers to take the cash cart to the vault—exactly what the Malloy twins had intended all along.

Danny (Part III): Danny’s soft spot for Tess appears to have gotten him into major trouble. The minute Danny steps away from her, he’s apprehended by two of Benedict’s goons. They then proceed to escort him to a room *without* cameras. Soon, a massive man—in both height and girth—enters, presumably to beat Danny to a pulp at Benedict’s behest.

Since Danny is both ringleader and mastermind of the caper, his “capture” is the worst setback thus far. Its sting is all the more painful because it echoes another loss Danny’s experienced at the hands of Terry Benedict—Tess’s heart.

In fact, out of all the troughs in the entire series, this one has the biggest effect on audiences. The rest either come in a close second or function more like salt thrown on other, more painful, wounds.

However, Danny’s not just trying to fleece Terry Benedict; he’s fleecing audiences as well. Danny’s actually well acquainted with the massive man (Bruiser). This trough was all part of the plan, another act of misdirection, which brings Danny closer to his avowed goal.

While Bruiser pretends to beat up Danny, the charming con artist clammers into overhead vents which eventually lead him to the target vault. As aforementioned, Danny’s argument with Rusty was all a ruse. Danny was never going to miss out on triggering that vault. It’s *his* plan, after all.

Linus (Part II): Still posing as a member of the Gaming Commission, Linus, with help from Frank Catton, another member of the con artist crew, succeeds in swiping critical security codes from Benedict’s pockets. Unfortunately, when Linus is en route to use these codes, casino security detects Linus’s presence.

This setback, although brief, does possess an extra degree of intensity because of the triumphs (passing Benedict’s test with regards to Hal Lindley, pickpocketing the codes from Benedict) which preceded it. Happily, Danny has contingency plans in place—in the form of Saul’s second trough of hell.

Saul (Part II): As Lyman Zerga, Saul is stationed in the casino security center. He’s there to monitor the deposition of a special briefcase into the Bellagio’s vault. When Linus is detected by casino security, Saul collapses to the ground. At that moment, it really does appear like Saul might’ve died. An avid consumer of antacid tablets, it seems like the stress was too much for the guy.

After Danny’s capture, this trough probably has the most impact on audiences, who have to wait a few minutes to learn that Saul’s death was only a smokescreen. Soon, a doctor arrives to examine Saul. But it’s not a real physician, merely

Rusty in disguise.

Once Rusty pronounces Saul dead, the elderly con man is carted away by the Malloy twins (also in disguise) on a paramedic stretcher. In other words, Saul's death isn't just a distraction device to cover for Linus. It's also Saul's exit strategy, designed to remove him from the premises before Benedict discovers he's been robbed.

Yen: Compared to the other troughs, Yen's is an extended sequence. It begins when he tries to emerge from the cash cart used to smuggle him inside the Bellagio vault. Unluckily, the briefcase Saul managed to also get deposited inside of the vault was placed right on top of Yen's cash cart. As Yen pushes open the cart's lid, Saul's briefcase slides off of it, coming perilously close to touching the ground—and setting off the vault's security sensors.

Thankfully, Yen manages to catch the briefcase by its wristlet just in the nick of time. But his travails aren't over yet. He almost shorts a critical jump. (Again, if he had missed, he would've set off the vault's security sensors.) After he makes the jump, Yen's in position to attach plastic explosives on his side of the vault door.

Meanwhile, Danny, accompanied by Linus, places some sort of corresponding explosive on the other side of the vault door. Twenty seconds before Danny sets off the trigger, the bandages wrapped around Yen's injured hand get stuck in the door, pinning the Chinese acrobat in place.

Monitoring all of the action, tech expert Livingston Dell starts to freak out (which I suppose is his mini-sized trough). Livingston tries to communicate with Linus to tell him not to trigger the explosives, but Linus's earwig was blown out when Basher set off the pinch.

Unaware that Yen is stuck on the other side, Danny detonates the explosives. Miraculously, they don't go off. It turns out the batteries in the detonator were dead.

While Linus and Danny replace the batteries, Yen yanks himself free from his bandage moorings. Danny pushes the trigger again. The detonator works. The vault is now open.

Everyone's troughs finally come to an end. Even though this series of troughs begins early on—Basher freaks out approximately halfway through the movie—it concludes right on schedule, when the film hits the 76%-mark.

While each trough in this motley assortment possesses varying degrees of intensity, notice that all of them contain the appropriate level of pain for a light-hearted caper with a PG-13 rating. You'll notice too that Danny's escape hatch, in the form of his prior relationship with Bruiser, wasn't set up in advance.

You may be interested to know that in an earlier draft of the screenplay from 1999, Bruiser's existence had been set up not once, but twice. By establishing Bruiser's character, this screenplay draft overcame a credibility hurdle.

But, at the same time, all of this setup diluted the script's charm and audiences' overall enjoyment. In this case, it was better to eliminate the setup altogether in order to maintain the surprise when Bruiser and Danny's pre-existing friendship is revealed.

That's because OCEAN'S 11 is a con movie. Much like Sherlock Holmes, if Danny has a few tricks up his sleeve that he's kept hidden, audiences don't begrudge him those. They gladly accept that he may know more than he's letting on, and when he does reveal that knowledge, they won't cry foul or criticize the film's credibility.

Counterintuitively, the same principle applies to the dead batteries in the detonator, which saved Yen's skin. That's a pretty big coincidence. As Alex Epstein points out in *Crafty Screenwriting*, the hero isn't supposed to be on the receiving end of such lucky breaks—and certainly not so late in the game. But because this is a caper, audiences don't mind that fortuitous bit of luck, especially when Danny and his crew have engineered so much of their own misfortune.

Those purposeful acts of misdirection did indeed, as intended, enchant audiences. Even so, it's important to realize that *unanticipated* hiccups like the appearance of Bucky Buchanan and Yen's bandage debacle (both of which were absent from the 1999 screenplay draft) also engaged audiences and deepened their sense of suspense.

If you're writing a caper like OCEAN'S 11, it's good to keep that in mind. When you're devising troughs for your heroes, aim for a balance between purposeful misdirection and unanticipated setbacks. (And if you'd like to learn more screenwriting tips gleaned by comparing the 1999 draft of the screenplay to the film version released in theaters, read this article, [11 Quick & Simple Script Revision Tips Stolen from Ocean's 11.](#))

Another trick to steal from the OCEAN'S 11 playbook is to have the hero engineer his own capture, because, paradoxically, that is part of his exit strategy. Danny's case is especially noteworthy since it enables multiple characters to extract themselves from the premises.

As mentioned earlier, Danny wanted to get red-flagged. He wanted to draw attention to himself so that when he approaches Tess on the night of the heist, he'd be sequestered away in a small room.

This situation allows him to access the casino's overhead vents, which in turn, enables him to reach the casino vault undetected. Critically, it also enables him to leave the casino in one piece.

Benedict suspects that Danny had something to do with the heist, but Benedict doesn't know it for sure. It seems impossible for Danny to be involved since Danny was in the small camera-free room with Bruiser all night—exactly what Danny wanted Benedict to believe.

Now, you may be thinking that all of this chicanery was not worthwhile. Surely, Danny could've snuck inside the casino in secret. True, he probably could have.

But, his bold entrance is at the cornerstone of exit strategies for other characters. When Danny says good-bye to Tess on the night of the heist, right before he's escorted to his small room by Benedict's goons, Danny slips a cell phone into Tess's coat pocket.

In the end, Rusty uses this phone to communicate with Benedict, who, as a result of their conversation, authorizes the local SWAT team to access the Bellagio's vault. And that's exactly how the con men coolly walk out of Benedict's casino carrying \$160 million in cash. They're clad in SWAT gear; their getaway car is a SWAT truck.

"Fine, fine," you might be saying. "But isn't Linus a skilled pickpocket? Couldn't he have planted the cell phone in Tess's coat?" Perhaps, although this might've ruined his cover as a member of the Nevada Gaming Commission. That's not the real issue though.

Danny had to draw attention to himself, he had to get caught, so that when Benedict confronts him *mano-a-mano*, Danny could ask him if Benedict would give up Tess in order to get his millions back. Observing this interaction, Tess decides to break it off with Benedict. So you see, Danny's capture was all part of his exit strategy for *her*.

As far as post-trough realizations go, OCEAN'S 11 is peculiar in that none of Ocean's crew of con artists—including Danny Ocean himself—seems to have any. That isn't to say the end of the movie is completely devoid of realizations. Benedict, of course, realizes that he's been conned out of millions. Through a series of flashbacks, audiences realize how the caper was pulled off. Finally, Tess realizes that Benedict is not the man he appears to be and that she was wrong to let Danny go.

That last realization is pretty critical. It's also yet another trick you should steal from the charm-filled caper. If your movie revolves around obtaining a large sum of money, link the cash to a more emotionally resonant objective, like, let's say, a man trying to win back the heart of his ex-wife.

Tess's value to Danny is shown in a variety of ways. For one thing, he still wears his wedding ring. With heart-stopping intensity he tells Tess outright, "I came here for you. I want to get on with my life. I want you with me."

My favorite example of showing how valuable Tess is to Danny occurs when Benedict demolishes an old casino. Everyone at the ceremony turns around to gawk at the display—everyone except for Danny, who keeps his gaze squarely set on Tess.

Note: this old casino belongs to Reuben, who's bankrolling Danny's schemes. While it could be argued that its demolition comprises Reuben's own miniature trough, I'm leaning against that argument mostly because Reuben is a background figure in the scene, which focuses primarily on Danny and Tess.

Even though OCEAN'S 11 is a light-hearted film, audiences felt something real and meaningful during each individual character's trough of hell *because each of these setbacks not only jeopardized the caper but also Danny's goal of getting the girl*.

Without the Tess subplot, audiences still would want to see Ocean's crew succeed. They're an extremely likeable bunch (especially in comparison to control freak Benedict). But it's Tess's storyline which heightens the story stakes and really

causes audiences to emotionally invest in the story's outcome.

The result?

A happy ending, accompanied by even happier box office returns!

A FEW GOOD MEN

In this gripping courtroom drama, Daniel Kaffee, an inexperienced Navy lawyer, must defend two Marines (Dawson and Downey) against charges of murder. They're accused of killing a fellow soldier (Santiago) at their base on Guantanamo Bay. The two defendants didn't mean to kill Santiago; they just meant to rough him up a little.

In fact, they were following orders, specifically, a Code Red—an informal order given to Marines to discipline one of their own when he's not performing up to par.

Early on in the movie, we see Colonel Jessup, the intimidating commanding officer at Guantanamo, order Kendrick, one of the rising stars in Jessup's company, "to train the lad [Santiago]."

Kendrick then ordered Dawson and Downey to carry out the disciplinary engagement. Tragically, Santiago's "training" didn't make him a better Marine.

It made him a corpse.

Proving that, however, is a Herculean task, one which we're not quite sure Kaffee is up to, even with the help of his co-counsel, Sam Weinberg and Jo Galloway. Kaffee only has nine months of experience, and because of his penchant for plea bargaining, none of those months was spent inside of a courtroom.

Furthermore, Kaffee has big footsteps to follow. His father, now deceased, was a skilled trial lawyer and former attorney general of the United States. Afraid he won't measure up to his father's legacy, Kaffee has, thus far, chosen to avoid the courtroom altogether. At one point, Dawson scornfully comments to Kaffee, "You're such a coward. I can't believe they let you wear a uniform."

Even so, despite the odds stacked against him and despite his own personal demons, Kaffee seems to be making headway at Dawson and Downey's trial. That is...until we reach the trough of hell.

When two key characters unexpectedly turn into foes, Kaffee's defense—already weak—crumbles completely. (Appropriately enough, on the DVD edition of the movie, this sequence is entitled "Double Setback.")

To understand what these setbacks are, it's helpful to review Kaffee's three-pronged defense strategy, which is comprised of the following elements:

- intent (Dawson and Downey hadn't dipped a rag in poison before stuffing it into Santiago's mouth)
- Code Reds (they exist, and they're a common and accepted practice on Guantanamo Bay even though, on the record, they aren't supposed to occur)
- the order itself (Kendrick ordered Dawson and Downey to give Santiago a Code Red; Dawson and Downey had to follow this order)

With respect to the first two elements, Kaffee hasn't proven them conclusively. But thanks to his skilled cross-examination of the prosecution's witnesses, he's managed to give credence to those ideas. As a matter of fact, these small, but noteworthy, triumphs contrast sharply with the ensuing pair of setbacks, deepening the latter's emotional effect.

When Downey's put on the stand, it emerges that he didn't directly receive the Code Red order from Kendrick. He received it secondhand, from his co-defendant, Dawson.

This is a major setback, primarily because Dawson had been involved in an illegal fenceline shooting incident some days prior. Santiago, the only eyewitness to the incident, had promised to give details about the shooting to investigative officials in exchange for a transfer off of Guantanamo.

Hence, it appears that Dawson had a motive to kill Santiago and is only trying to use the Code Red as a smokescreen to conceal his true intent. This revelation creates a gaping hole in Kaffee's case, which remember, depends, in large part, on establishing that Kendrick had given the Code Red order to both Dawson and Downey. In other words, Downey basically sabotaged his own defense—a very intriguing use of the vanishing ally trough type.

Interestingly, the first impression Downey makes on audiences is one of childlike innocence. The first time we hear Downey speak, he asks Dawson, “Hal, are we in Washington D.C.?” Later, Galloway will bring Downey the comic books he was requesting and will comment to Kaffee that “Downey doesn’t know where he is, or why he’s been arrested,” details which reinforce this characterization.

This makes Downey’s courtroom admission both surprising (he’s the last person someone would suspect of sabotaging the case) and credible (because of his childlike dependence on Dawson he wouldn’t distinguish between a secondhand order from Dawson and a firsthand one from Kendrick).

Critically, Galloway was primarily responsible for preparing Downey for the trial. From the film’s outset, she’s been painted as a tenacious investigator, but someone who’s “not cut out for litigation. All passion, no street smarts.” Because of this portrayal, her blunder doesn’t set off any credibility monitors.

To see why this is important, imagine if Kaffee or Weinberg had been responsible for prepping Downey for trial. If Downey had made his startling revelation at trial, audiences wouldn’t be reeling from shock. They would’ve been questioning how two capable trial lawyers had neglected to uncover this information, and their experience of the film would be tainted by skepticism.

While Downey’s testimony is a powerful illustration of the flexibility of the vanishing ally trough type, it highlights an even more crucial screenwriting lesson. Naturally, screenwriter Aaron Sorkin knew all along that Downey hadn’t been in the room with Dawson when Kendrick had ordered the two of them to give Santiago a Code Red.

But Sorkin didn’t reveal that information before the trial. And he didn’t reveal it when the prosecution was making its case. He revealed it right when the defense was making solid progress—*when it would have the most impact*.

Although Downey’s testimony is pretty damning, all isn’t lost. Not quite. There’s one other witness they can bring to the stand: Lieutenant Colonel Markinson. A subordinate of Jessup’s, Markinson strongly objected to employing a Code Red to teach Santiago a lesson.

In fact, he suggested that Santiago be transferred off of the base. If Jessup had listened to Markinson, Santiago would still be alive.

When Santiago dies, Jessup is forced to cover his tracks. According to him, he never ordered Kendrick to administer a Code Red. According to him, Santiago was scheduled to be transferred off of Guantanamo on the next available flight which departed from Cuba at 6 AM (mere hours after Santiago had died). To prove it, Jessup has Markinson sign a phony transfer order.

Soon after Santiago dies, Markinson disappears. Kaffee, Weinberg, and Galloway all try to track him down, and the intensity of their desire subtly establishes the value of Markinson’s testimony. When Markinson turns up on his own volition, he’s protected by six federal marshals, which again reinforces his value to Kaffee’s case.

Markinson also reveals to Kaffee that there was a flight which left Cuba seven hours earlier. In other words, if, as he claims, Jessup had really intended to transfer Santiago, Jessup would’ve booked this earlier flight. However, when Kaffee tracks down flight log books, there’s no record of this flight.

It appears Jessup has called in a few favors to get these records erased. Without Markinson’s testimony, there’s no way to prove the earlier flight existed, and no way to prove Jessup bypassed the opportunity to transfer Santiago off-base.

After Downey’s revelation, Markinson becomes even more critical. Everything hinges upon his testimony. *Everything*. Unfortunately, in another example of the vanishing ally trough type, Markinson commits suicide. With this unforeseen setback, now all is well and truly lost.

Dawson and Downey’s fate seems sealed. They will spend the rest of their lives in prison. While these story stakes are huge, they are not the only characters with something to lose.

Kaffee pushed Kendrick on the stand, coming close to insinuating that Kendrick was committing perjury. If Kaffee proceeds, he’s likely to be court-martialed for professional misconduct, “something that’ll be stapled to every job application he’ll ever fill out.”

Added to that injury is the insult to the Kaffee family name. Kaffee’s current situation is an embarrassment to the vaunted

legacy of his father, putting Kaffee into a state of acute psychic distress.

Drunk and unstable, Kaffee arrives at his apartment, and viciously yells at Galloway. Because this behavior is so uncharacteristic of Kaffee, this tense scene underscores just how extensive Kaffee's distress is. We've never seen him drunk before. He usually doesn't yell to express his dissatisfaction either, preferring to rely upon a well-timed wisecrack instead.

Most importantly, he's lost the calm self-assurance he's worn throughout the film as a second skin. Stung by his harsh words, Galloway leaves Kaffee's apartment after issuing a sarcastic comment whose bite is belied by the tears in her eyes.

Interestingly, in an early draft of the screenplay, Kaffee and Galloway became romantically involved at the very end. Although the film eliminated that storyline, the rift between the two of them still has emotional impact, primarily because Galloway believed in Kaffee, even when he doubted himself.

Now, after exhibiting signs of bravery, he's reverting back to his cowardly ways. While Kaffee's words hurt her, Galloway's more pained by his unwillingness to commit to Dawson and Downey's case and his inclination "to use what happened today as an excuse to give up."

For his part, Kaffee resents Galloway for goading him to take this case to court—which has the potential to destroy his career—in the first place. Also, he countered her faith in him with faith of his own, entrusting her to properly prepare Downey for trial. Kaffee gave her a chance to prove herself, but she didn't hold up her end of the unspoken bargain.

Fortunately, Kaffee's even-keeled co-counselor, Weinberg, is there to push Kaffee into his post-trough realization. Even though Kaffee's father was an exceptional trial lawyer, if it were up to him, Weinberg would choose Kaffee to represent Dawson and Downey over Kaffee's dad "any day of the week and twice on Sundays." Kaffee responds by asking Weinberg if Weinberg would subpoena Jessup to the stand (as Galloway had suggested before making her departure).

Weinberg says that he wouldn't. And Kaffee's dad wouldn't. But at the end of the day, only Kaffee's decision matters.

Would Daniel Kaffee put Colonel Jessup on the stand?

This question leads to two critical post-trough realizations and payoffs of previous setups. One, Kaffee *would* put Jessup on the stand. Due to his narcissistic personality (smoothly set up in Act One and the beginning of Act Two), Jessup wants to admit he ordered the Code Red and is livid that he has to pretend otherwise.

Two, if Jessup had, as the Colonel had claimed, arranged for Santiago to be transferred off-base, then Santiago's closet full of uniforms (also set up in Act Two) should have been packed up in preparation for the Marine's departure—but it wasn't. Armed with these two realizations, Kaffee extracts an admission of guilt from Jessup and protects his clients from a lifetime in prison.

This bold move was, of course, the only way Kaffee could've won. Throughout the film, he's expressed doubts about their chance of success. "We're going to get creamed," he mutters to himself right before the trial. "I think you should prepare yourself for the fact that we're going to lose...we're gonna lose huge," he tells Galloway at a local seafood shack.

Although Kaffee was putting his all into the trial (and not employing a "fast-food, slick-ass, Persian bazaar" superficial style of lawyering Galloway once accused him of), victory was always a long shot—even with Markinson's testimony, as prized as it was.

As the prosecutor tells Kaffee at a bar, Markinson's "a crazy man. His testimony isn't going to hold up in court." If Markinson hadn't committed suicide, the trial's outcome would've boiled down to Jessup's word versus Markinson's. Since Jessup is more wily—and less encumbered by guilt—it's likely that Jessup would've painted Markinson as a weak fool and swayed the jury to his point of view.

To truly win, Kaffee had to put Jessup on the stand—action the young lawyer wouldn't have taken until his trough of hell forced him to embrace such desperate measures.

Without Jessup's admission, Dawson and Downey probably wouldn't have been cleared of charges of murder and conspiracy to commit murder. Kaffee would still be living in the shadow of his father's legacy. And Jessup...Jessup

would still continue to abuse Marines with high-handed paternalism.

A brief note about the rate of infliction: Downey's damning testimony and Markinson's suicide are both unpredictable events which completely derail Kaffee's case and self-assurance. To use our medieval warfare analogy, it's as if Kaffee had been struck by a mace with flanged heads at either end of its shaft.

However, Kaffee's alienation from Galloway is neither as unpredictable nor as unsettling. If it's not a "blow from a mace," then what is it? It could be argued that it's "a cut" layered on top of the mace wounds to intensify Kaffee's pain. It could also be argued that Galloway's departure doesn't really make things worse for Kaffee—he can't sink any lower—but is actually intended to emphasize the depth of his distress caused by the Downey and Markinson setbacks.

But such splitting of hairs is rather unconstructive. No matter how you characterize the rate of infliction of Kaffee's wounds, his trough of hell is a textbook example of how to bring a hero to his "all is lost" moment, while engaging audiences till THE END.

LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING

In *THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*, a motley crew composed of four hobbits from the Shire (Frodo, Sam, Pip, and Merry), a wizard (Gandalf), an elf (Legolas), a dwarf (Gimli), and two men (Aragorn and Boromir) set out on a quest to destroy a dangerous ring, which can only be dissolved by the fires of Mount Doom. The group attempts many routes to Mount Doom, but an accomplice of the villain closes off each one.

As a last resort, the Fellowship attempts to reach their destination via the Mines of Moria, where, we learn, dwells a demon of shadow and flame, an ancient force of evil whom even Gandalf dreads.

As the wizard says to Frodo, the ring-bearer, “There are many powers in this world...for good or for evil. Some are greater than I am. And against some, I have not yet been tested.”

Thus, the group’s trough of hell sequence begins with their descent into the underground passages of Moria. (If you’re familiar with the film, you might think this starting point is rather arbitrary. We’ll get to that in a bit.) Initially, their journey is filled with psychological distress, as Gandalf struggles to lead them through a complex array of pathways he has long since forgotten.

This psychological distress is overlaid by Gimli’s own psychic agony. Observing his race reduced to nothing but bone and dust wears heavily upon the proud dwarf’s soul. Once Gimli discovers the tomb of his cousin, Balin, he is also filled with emotional pain. But Gimli doesn’t have long to grieve for the death of his cousin. Foes—in the form of Orcs and a massive cave-troll—are on the way.

Their attack initiates a lengthy action sequence, which is dominated by the Fellowship’s valiant struggle with the seemingly indestructible cave-troll. Although the troll is wounded multiple times, he does not fall. Eventually, he stabs Frodo with a large spear. The small hobbit gasps and falls to the ground.

Observing this tragedy, the other characters react with a mixture of horror and grief before dispatching with the troll and their remaining opponents. During this brief period of time, audiences believe that Frodo has died. But, his death is really a bit of misdirection. Thanks to his shirt of *mithril*, a substance which is “as light as a feather and as hard as dragon scales,” Frodo lives.

Naturally, Frodo’s resurrection device didn’t miraculously appear out of nowhere. It was set up well in advance. Right after the Fellowship was formed, Frodo’s uncle, Bilbo Baggins, gave him several gifts, including the shirt of *mithril*.

Immediately thereafter, Bilbo spots the ring of power. When Frodo prevents him from touching it, Bilbo’s features undergo a radical transformation, attracting audience attention, and thus, camouflaging the setup. In the end, 32 minutes transpire between Bilbo’s presentation of the *mithril* shirt and Frodo’s miraculous recovery.

Apparently, the filmmakers thought *too* much time had elapsed between the setup and the payoff because the *mithril* shirt is referenced again as the Fellowship journeys through the Mines. Gandalf casually mentions that Bilbo owned a *mithril* shirt “whose worth is greater than the value of the Shire.” I’ll leave you to decide if this callback was necessary to reinforce the credibility of the resurrection device or not.

It should also be noted that this is not the first time in the film that Frodo has been on the brink of death. Earlier on, he was stabbed by a Nazgul blade, and if not for elvish medicine, he would’ve died. Even so, Frodo’s close call with death in the Mines of Moria doesn’t seem repetitious, most likely because when Frodo was stabbed by the Nazgul, (1) the Fellowship had only been half-formed, (2), he was facing a vastly different foe, and (3), he had been wearing the ring of power, which made the whole experience rather distorted and hazy.

The Fellowship doesn’t have long to rejoice in Frodo’s *mithril*-engendered comeback. The danger’s not over yet. Now, the Fellowship is surrounded by hordes of goblins, who suddenly disburse as quickly as they had amassed. They’ve been scared off by the approach of the Balrog, the demon of shadow and flame against whom Gandalf is untested.

Like sensible folk, the Fellowship flees—initiating a second action sequence in which they must run across narrow passages which buckle underneath their feat, leap over a gap in a stone staircase, and, if that weren’t enough, fend off

goblin arrows.

To enable the others to safely cross the Bridge of Khazad-dum, Gandalf faces his fears and squares off against the Balrog. In a moment of powerful magic, Gandalf forcefully proclaims to the demon, “You shall not pass.”

Succumbing to the spell, the Balrog plunges to the fiery depths underneath the crumbling bridge. Another victory—one made all the sweeter since Gandalf feared he didn’t have the capability to achieve it.

But all does not end well. At the last moment, the Balrog’s whip encircles Gandalf’s ankle and brings the wizard down with him. The emotional impact of this tragedy is heightened by its contrast with the preceding zeniths (Frodo’s “resurrection” and Gandalf’s momentary victory) and by the significance of the loss. Gandalf is no ordinary mortal, but a wizard of great power. Losing this particular ally is practically tantamount to failure.

Frodo cries out in denial, an especially poignant reaction because of the accumulation of losses he’s already incurred on this journey: having to say good-bye to his peaceful life in the Shire; being stalked—and almost fatally wounded—by the Nazgul; having to resist the steady and stealthy attacks of the ring which exerts a poisonous will of its own; getting pierced by the cave-troll’s spear; and now, watching a father figure whose counsel he values so dearly fall into an abyss.

The nature of Frodo’s relationship with Gandalf is particularly important. It elevates this trough of hell into a moment of deep emotional resonance because it echoes both the sorrow Frodo experienced at parting with the uncle who had raised him as a son and the grief Frodo must have felt after losing his parents (in circumstances which are never disclosed to the audience).

In the audio commentary of the special extended DVD edition of the film, actor Billy Boyd, who plays the hobbit Pippin, sums it up best: “the loss of Gandalf is like losing a parent...it felt like as long as Gandalf was there, nothing too bad could go wrong, because he knows everything.”

In the film, the reactions of some of the other characters also emphasize just how devastating a loss Gandalf’s death is. Evincing uncharacteristic gentleness, Boromir wants to give the hobbits a moment to mourn. As an elf, Legolas should remain stoic, but he, too, is moved.

When the Fellowship takes respite within Caras Galadhon, the heart of Elessar on Middle-earth, the elves sing a lament on Gandalf’s behalf. Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel, who rule over Caras Galadhon, reinforce Gandalf’s value, stating, “Without Gandalf, hope is lost. The quest hangs but by the edge of a knife.”

Soon thereafter, in a magic mirror of water, Lady Galadriel reveals to Frodo what the future will hold, should he fail to destroy the ring. His home, the Shire, will be in flame; his fellow hobbits will be shackled by heavy chains. These are serious stakes, which are in even more jeopardy because the Fellowship no longer can avail itself of Gandalf’s magic and wisdom.

Observe that these stakes are also something which audiences have emotionally connected to. At the film’s beginning, they became acquainted with the Shire and its folk, whose “hearts truly lie in peace, quiet, and good, tilled earth.” To borrow Scott Myers’s verbiage, the audiences have witnessed the “small story” of the Shire set against the “substantial saga” of Middle-earth. Because of this, they care about the destruction of both.

Lady Galadriel’s prediction does more than highlight the story stakes; it also pushes Frodo into his post-trough realizations. Now, he is truly aware of what kind of commitment he has made. He carries a burden which will not leave him unscathed, even if he is successful in destroying the ring.

Furthermore, this is a burden that he cannot share. He must bear the ring into the heart of the enemy’s territory—without the aid and companionship of the Fellowship upon whom he has come to rely. As Lady Galadriel tells him, “to bear a ring of power is to be alone.”

On the surface, it may seem that Gandalf’s death is not very paradoxical. It doesn’t appear to contain a benefit necessary for Frodo and the rest of the Fellowship to achieve their goal. However, if you look a little deeper—and a little farther—you’ll discover that Gandalf’s death does contain a few silver linings.

For one thing, it did enable the other members of the Fellowship to escape from the Balrog. Without Gandalf’s sacrifice, it is unlikely they would’ve survived. Additionally, right before the Fellowship embarked on their journey, Gandalf had promised Frodo to help him “bear this burden as long as it’s yours to bear.”

But Gandalf is no longer there, and the burden is still Frodo's to carry. Gandalf was unable to keep his promise. This state of affairs forces Frodo to confront the harsh reality: he must separate himself from the Fellowship.

Finally, to see the real benefit contained within Gandalf's death, we must stop analyzing THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING in isolation, and begin to study it as part of THE LORD OF THE RINGS trilogy. Later, in THE TWO TOWERS, Gandalf the Grey will come back to life, reincarnating in a new form, as Gandalf the White.

As the White Wizard, he is able to save King Theoden from an evil wizard's mind control—something outside of Gandalf the Grey's purview of magic. In other words, if Gandalf the Grey hadn't have died, he couldn't have reincarnated as Gandalf the White, and consequently, the Fellowship wouldn't have been able to make use of King Theoden's critical resources.

About 124 minutes into this film, Gandalf declares, "We now have but one choice: we must face the long dark of Moria." This is the starting point I've selected for the movie's trough of hell. You may feel this is rather arbitrary. Why not include the snowy crossing through the mountains of Caradhras? Or the battle with the Kraken-like creature in the pool outside of Moria's entrance?

To be honest, there's no specific reason. Include them if you wish. Nonetheless, we're probably all in agreement that the sequence ends once the Fellowship—minus Gandalf—emerges from the mines into the open. This occurs 147 minutes into the movie, which means that the trough of hell sequence (in the special extended DVD edition at least) takes up 23 minutes of screentime.

It's no wonder the trough of hell sequence is so lengthy; the filmmakers used "mixing and matching" (advanced trough technique #6) to full advantage, seamlessly interweaving multiple elements: the psychological and psychic distress which begins the sequence; two pairs of pain duos, each of which follow the pattern of an action sequence which culminates in emotional devastation; and a bit of misdirection.

Notice that the scenes in Caras Galadon with Lady Galadriel and Lord Celeborn significantly slow down the story's pace. Still, this respite is welcome. It gives audiences breathing room between the action-heavy sequences involving the cave-troll & the Balrog and the climactic battle which is soon to come.

On that note, during the climax, as Lady Galadriel had predicted, Boromir tries to steal the ring from Frodo. However, Boromir realizes the error of his thinking, and "having kept his honor," dies a redeemed man. His death is quite poignant, and coupled with Gandalf's, creates a story with an emotional intensity few others can rival.

At this point, it's probably easier to understand why Peter Jackson used misdirection to trick everyone into believing Aragorn had died in THE TWO TOWERS; Jackson needed to infuse this script with the emotional weight found in THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING.

One final point: the Fellowship begins with quite a large group of nine members. Although an ensemble of this size makes the "divide and conquer" technique an enticing one to employ during the trough of hell, the story keeps the Fellowship together. That is, until the climax.

Then the Fellowship starts to separate out into different configurations, a pattern which will be sustained throughout the next two installments of the trilogy.

BRAVEHEART

With single-minded intensity, William Wallace fights to liberate Scotland from English oppression. If anyone can accomplish the Goliath-sized task, it seems it would have to be Wallace, whose passion, courage, and integrity rally commoners to his side.

Despite numerous obstacles—and a very wily villain—Wallace accrues victory after victory. That is, until the battle of Falkirk, the setting for Wallace’s bitter trough of hell.

At first, it seems that Falkirk will be another notch on Wallace’s belt of success. Irish infantrymen, who’ve joined Edward the Longshanks, “the most ruthless king ever to sit on the throne of England,” advance menacingly down the battlefield. But this is actually a bit of misdirection. At the last second, the Irish completely change their demeanor and greet their Scottish opponents like long-lost friends.

Then, when the English cavalry try to attack, they’re scorched by flames. (Before the battle, Wallace’s men had seeded the ground with fuel and now, at the opportune moment, have ignited the fuel with flaming arrows.) The English army’s greatest resource—their cavalry—disintegrates into a mass of confused terror.

These two victories are followed by a lengthy action set piece on the battlefield. Although this combat was preceded by victory, unfortunately, it culminates in defeat and betrayal.

As Wallace’s men are slaughtered, he signals for reinforcements, helmed by Scottish nobles, to enter the fray. Having been bought off by promises of titles and land, the greedy lords abandon Wallace, withdrawing just at the moment when Wallace needs them most. Despite this gross betrayal, Wallace continues to fight. Even when an arrow pierces his heart, he persists.

Assured of victory, Longshanks starts to leave the battle site. Observing this, Wallace chases after the king’s entourage. A knight whose visage is hidden by a silver helmet is tasked with protecting the king. He does so, unseating Wallace from Wallace’s steed. Eventually, Wallace manages to unmask the knight.

It’s Robert the Bruce, someone whom Wallace ardently believed was his friend, not his foe. Leading contender for the vacant throne of Scotland, Bruce is the one noble who can unite the other Scottish clans to the cause of liberty. In fact, before the battle of Falkirk even began, Wallace avowed, with unwavering conviction, that Bruce would come to his aid.

It’s this faith in Bruce which makes Bruce’s betrayal wound all the more deeply. Stabbed in the back by a man whom he trusted, Wallace would naturally be filled with emotional pain. Confused about how to proceed, he’s probably experiencing psychological pain as well. Additionally, since he put his faith in the wrong person and jeopardized his ability to ensure his people have freedom—his very *raison d’etre*—Wallace would also be suffering from acute psychic distress.

Although not overly lengthy, BRAVEHEART’s trough of hell sequence is probably one of the most emotionally wrenching in cinema, making use of contrast, value, and the effect of the aggregate to create a moment of deep emotional impact. Wallace’s victories at the battle’s outset (the Irish turnabout, the destruction of the English cavalry) provide a stark contrast to Wallace’s crushing defeat at its end.

So too does the majority of Act Two, in which Wallace flies from one victory to another: avenging his wife by killing the magistrate who slit her throat; burning an English garrison to the ground and killing the English noble who ruled it; rallying the morale of Scottish commoners, eventually leading them to victory at the battle of Sterling; and besting the English on their own soil by sacking York and killing the king’s own nephew.

That victory is particularly meaningful. As Wallace tells the Princess of Wales, York was the staging point of every invasion of Scotland. And if Wallace can sack York, then he can just as easily conquer southern England as well.

Of course, Falkirk changes all of that. This defeat stings harshly, not just because of its contrast to all of the victories which preceded it, but also because it jeopardizes something of infinite value.

Freedom.

The Scottish have endured extreme cruelty at the hands of the English. At the minor end of the spectrum, the Scots are forbidden to train with real weapons. Their pipes and their tunes are outlawed. At the more egregious end of the spectrum, several honorable Scottish nobles have been murdered by Longshanks, who, under the banner of truce, lured them into a trap.

To breed out the Scottish, the English king has also instituted the brutal custom of *prima nocte*, which permits English lords to bed a Scottish commoner on the night of her wedding. Wallace's demise at the end of Falkirk signals that Scotland will, in all likelihood, suffer another "100 years of theft, rape, and murder."

It's important to note these crimes carry emotional resonance because audiences have become not only attached to Wallace but also well-acquainted with the inhabitants of Wallace's shire. They've grown fond of colorful personalities like Hamish and Hamish's dad. They've seen local men and women tending to the land or tending to their chores.

Most importantly, they've seen the villagers celebrate the union of a young couple (before the festivities were ruined by an English noble claiming his *prima nocte* rights). To put it another way, while the liberation of the entire nation is the "substantial saga," much like *THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*, the depiction of pastoral life becomes the "small story" which engaged audiences at a deeper level.

Additionally, the emotional intensity of Wallace's trough of hell is deepened by the losses he's already incurred via English oppression. Having fallen in love with a local lass named Marion, Wallace married her in secret to avoid the horror of *prima nocte*. When English soldiers attempted to rape her, Wallace rescued her. Although he was able to forestall the rape, he wasn't able to prevent her capture. To punish Wallace (and draw him out), the English magistrate slit her throat.

This is not the first personal tragedy the English have inflicted on Wallace. As aforementioned, Longshanks had lured several patriotic nobles to a barn under the guise of truce—only to greet them with slaughter instead of peace.

Nightmares featuring their dead bodies, hung from the barn rafters, haunt Wallace to this day. To avenge the Scottish nobles, Wallace's father and brother left their home to fight the English. They both died. Later, English soldiers even desecrate their graves in order to bait a trap for Wallace.

Wallace, like the Scottish nobles who trusted Longshanks's words of truce, trusted Bruce's word. And like the nobles before him, Wallace was betrayed, an experience made all the more harrowing because it echoes Wallace's past losses. Recalling Wallace's reaction as a young boy to the wholesale slaughter of the Scottish nobles, when he learns of Bruce's treachery, Wallace's eyes fill with sorrow and incredulity.

However, unlike the past, at Falkirk, Wallace staggers to the ground. It's the first time audiences have seen Wallace look defeated, the first time he's actually been taken out of commission. Thus, his reaction reveals just how extensively he is wounded by Bruce's betrayal.

Bruce, too, is not unaffected. As he realizes the extent of the damage he's inflicted, Bruce becomes horrified by what he's done. Instead of handing Wallace over to the English soldiers who are fast approaching, Bruce enables Wallace's escape. (To use our terminology, the vanishing ally miraculously has become Wallace's escape hatch.)

Yet, this double reversal—from friend to foe and back again—doesn't come across as a contrivance designed to prolong the story and provide audiences with a third act. That's because Bruce's internal conflict was established throughout the film.

His voice—filled with admiration for Wallace—opens the movie, providing audiences with the first lines of dialogue and with their first impression of Bruce. He explicitly expresses admiration for Wallace later on, telling his father, "This Wallace, he doesn't even have a knighthood, but he fights with passion, and he inspires..."

But interwoven with this admiration is indecision, indecision cultivated by Bruce's father who will do anything to survive and gain his son the Scottish crown. When audiences see Bruce's character on-screen for the first time, he comes across as someone—much like the young Prince of Wales—who lives in the shadow of his constantly machinating father.

Hence, Bruce is pulled in two opposite directions. Ambition and fear war with integrity and courage. This conflict is perfectly embodied by Bruce's aghast declaration made to his father after Bruce had given Wallace his word to unite the Scottish nobles: "This cannot be the way."

And so when Bruce betrays Wallace at Falkirk, and then immediately thereafter saves Wallace's life, Bruce's change of heart is completely believable.

After Wallace recovers from Falkirk, Bruce offers Wallace his pledge once more. Despite Bruce's previous betrayal, Wallace accepts it. His post-trough realization forces Wallace to acknowledge that "joining the nobles is the only hope for our people." Acting on that hope, Wallace visits Bruce's headquarters—only to be betrayed once again.

He is captured (and eventually killed), but not because of Bruce. This is a critical point. After the battle of Falkirk, like Wallace, Bruce experienced a pivotal post-trough realization.

In his words, "Those men who bled the ground red at Falkirk, they fought for William Wallace, and he fights for something I've never had. I took it from him when I betrayed him. I saw it in his face on the battlefield, and it's tearing me apart! I will never be on the wrong side again."

After Wallace's death, Bruce remains true to his vow, finally liberating the Scottish from English oppression. In 1314, on the Bannockburn field, the patriots of Scotland—starved and outnumbered—fought and won their freedom.

This victory partly explains why Wallace's agonizing trough of hell was paradoxically, in the long run, beneficial. If Bruce hadn't betrayed Wallace at Falkirk, Bruce's allegiance would constantly flip-flop.

Rendering all of Wallace's sacrifices naught, Bruce could've sabotaged Wallace at a later, more inopportune moment. (Perhaps at court, where Wallace's unfamiliarity with political intrigues—as well as his unwillingness to partake of them—would put him at a distinct disadvantage.)

But Bruce's post-trough realization crystallizes his conviction to be loyal to Scotland. And it is this unwavering loyalty which, in the end, helps secure Scotland's liberation and his position as its rightful king.

There's another paradox at work here too. While exceptionally strong and brave, Wallace was just a man—bound by human limitations. Human weakness would fell Wallace, just as it does all men. The movie alludes to this prior to the battle of Sterling. As Wallace rides before the amassed Scottish commoners, his countrymen regard him with disappointment.

According to tall tales, Wallace is seven feet tall. Fireballs are supposed to emanate from his eyes. He doesn't kill the English in scores; he kills them by the hundreds. Wallace, the mortal man, could never live up to his people's expectations.

But once Wallace is beheaded (and his body quartered), he is no longer a man. He transforms into a *symbol*.

The significance of this is best explained by Bruce Wayne in *BATMAN BEGINS*: "As a man, I'm flesh and blood. I can be ignored, destroyed. But as a symbol, I can be incorruptible, I can be everlasting."

Alive, Wallace was powerful, but mortal; dead, he is invincible and eternal. Even though the Scottish rebels are led by a man (Robert the Bruce), their spirits are buoyed by William Wallace the legend.

In Part II, we talked about how killing off your screenplay hero at the end might be an appropriately bold move if happy endings are anathema to you. Achieving victory *through* death is an interesting compromise which enables you to sidestep endings which are overly happy or overly grim.

The transformation of your hero from man into symbol leaves the sweet taste of hope in the mouths of audiences—along with the bitter sting of death. If you'd like to explore this concept further, I highly recommend that you read Ken Follett's magnum opus *The Pillars of the Earth*. (Sure, the paperback version is almost a thousand pages long—but what a lesson in storytelling!)

This analysis primarily focused on the trough of hell endured by the hero. However, it is interesting to note that the villain of the story, Edward the Longshanks, also endures significant psychic pain at the hands of the Princess of Wales.

Longshanks wants to subdue Scotland by any means necessary in order to expand the English empire on behalf of his son, the foppish Prince of Wales. As Longshanks lies in his bed, dying, the Princess of Wales whispers chilling words into his ear. "Your blood dies with you. A child who is not of your line grows in my belly... Your son will not sit long on the throne, I swear it."

In one stroke, the princess renders naught everything the ambitious king has accomplished. By removing his bloodline from England's throne, she has ruined his empire—a powerful example of wounding the villain by destroying a psychic extension of his identity.

Conclusion: The Importance of Being Earnest

This writing guide is intended to be a roadmap of sorts, making it easier for you to navigate through the middle of your screenplay or novel.

With it, you should be able to traverse the vast desert of Act Two more speedily, more effectively, more confidently, and hopefully, with more delight.

But the helpfulness of a map, even the very best ones, is limited by the person who interprets its signs.

Use this book in the spirit with which it is intended: as a resource, not a crutch. It's meant to spark your creativity, not stifle it. Your hero can't lose his best friend, his memory, his clothing, and his will to live just because you want to amplify his pain and intensify audiences' emotional experience at the end of Act Two.

Whatever rate of infliction you choose, whatever combination of trough types you employ, this sequence of story events must be true not only to your hero's character but also to human nature itself.

It's not enough to create an emotionally intense moment at this point in your story. For true impact, this emotion must feel authentic, not manufactured. As Hal Ackerman remarks in *Write Screenplays That Sell*, "We are a nation that is getting used to the eviscerated taste of processed foods. It's affecting our taste in art and politics. A lot of the studio films inundate us with so much fake emotion, we're in danger of accepting that as the real taste, like the tomato-like substances we find in supermarkets. As writers, let's keep growing the tomatoes in the garden."

Ackerman waxes poetically about authenticity of emotion for good reason. It's why storytellers are every bit as vital to society as physicians. Stories, too, have the power to heal.

But they do more than that. Stories—in particular the trough of hell—force a hero to be raw, vulnerable, and exposed.

In doing so, they force audiences—they force us—to recognize that we are not machines. That we are more than our professional and societal roles. That we are not always struggling in quiet desperation.

They force us to acknowledge that we are a unique blend of fragility, strength, and resilience. In short, they remind us to embrace our humanity.

At its meanest definition, a storyteller is a liar, a trader of tall tales, a purveyor of strange fictions, someone who stretches the truth for profit. At its greatest definition, a storyteller is someone who safeguards humanity. As long as there are storytellers in the world, society can never be completely lost.

It's a tremendous responsibility and a wonderful gift.

Claim both with pride.

I wish you much success with your storytelling journey.

Your Free Gift

Do you want to implement the techniques in this book right away?

I've created two easy-to-use worksheets, specifically designed to help you conquer Act Two.

To instantly download these FREE worksheets, click [here](#).

Need Help?

Do you need help with your screenplay? Especially with its structure? I can provide you with detailed feedback that you can immediately use to make your script stand out in a crowded marketplace.

To learn more about my script notes, click [here](#).

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Did you benefit from this screenwriting book? Improve your screenwriting karma and help other writers, who are lost in the wilderness of screenplay structure, discover it too!

Writing a brief review will only take a few seconds. I really do appreciate it—and so do the laws of karma!

Your mission, should you choose to accept it:

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- Improve your screenwriting karma
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- Sell it for six figures—or more

Good luck with all of your writing adventures!

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