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*Something to Learn, part 3***Meaning**

American culture has grown increasingly secular. As a result, it has lost many of the benefits of a Judeo-Christian foundation. Moral equivalence comes with a price recognized even by those who champion it.

One result of secularization is an erosion of the ability to tell meaningful stories. Why? Because Secular Humanism rejects the concept of Meaning altogether. Humans have no higher purpose, though we like to think that we do. Good and Evil are constructs of the mind and an evolving social system, not objective moral realities. Right and wrong are illusions we design to advance personal agendas. Meaning is about as relevant as Santa Claus.

I'm not even talking about religious meaning. I'm talking about, well, *meaning* in the common, ordinary sense of the word. Significance. Importance. Relevance. Without the basic assumption that something is more than just itself, that the person is more than a bag of meat, a sacred text more than just words on parchment or paper, a treasured heirloom more than a lump of silver, the events of one's story lose their power. They can't signify any real theme. They can only give the illusion of doing so, which is a kind of lie.

It has been said that politicians tell the truth in order to lie, and novelists lie in order to tell the truth. If so, then the novelist whose words convey a meaning that isn't there is really telling a lie in order to tell a lie.

The problem runs deep. Creative writing programs at the university level excel at teaching what might be called word photography. That is, they do tell students how to string together interesting words, how to choose precise nouns and strong verbs, how to avoid adjectives and adverbs. What they don't do is teach students how to tell a story their audience will love, how to structure a novel, a short story, a play.

They simply can't. To do so would undermine a deeply held quasi-religious view of the world.

Your reader has an inherent need for significance, for purpose. It is part of her nature as a human being, as unavoidable as hunger, as insistent as the desire for sleep. She will reject any story that implies otherwise. Even if it convinces her mind, it won't persuade her soul.

Successful secular novelists, writing from a humanist perspective, always employ the techniques of meaning. That is, they use **character change** and **revelation** to create the illusion that their story is meaningful.

Thus, the modern flood of books and films that couple human or self-centered themes (such as self-enlightenment and "true" friendship) with explosions, bathroom humor, and the glorification of power for its own sake.

LEARN

Thus, too, do modern storytellers employ virtue in their characters when it is convenient to do so (when they need us to like the character), and disregard it when virtue gets in the way of, say, smashing the villain with one's super-powers. But such techniques ring hollow when not coupled with conviction.

Not all meaningful stories survive the test of time. But the stories that do survive are almost always those that satisfy, on some level, our human thirst for significance. Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* would not be read today if its theme were as shallow as that of many modern stories. Can you imagine the three spirits telling Scrooge, in the face of his callous disregard for the suffering of impoverished children, that what he really needed was to believe in himself?

Character Change

The way a character changes in a story is perhaps the most significant aspect of any work of fiction. The way your Hero changes will tell your reader what meaning you want her to attach to the events of the story.

The biblical word for it is *repentance*, which means to turn around and go the other direction. But even apart from the bible, it is a storytelling device as old as recorded history. We love to tell and hear the story of The Man Who Learned Better. It is a basic plot that is continually recycled, and yet *it never fails* when it is used well. There seems to be something inside every person that recognizes the power and beauty of a positive character change, even when we don't want that same change for ourselves.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge is a callous, selfish old miser who never troubles himself with the misfortunes of those around him. On Christmas Eve he is visited by four spirits, the first being the departed soul of his dead partner. He is given a warning about the direction of his life; but it is not until he experiences the events of the book that he really changes.

As the story builds to a climactic moment of understanding for Scrooge, we are also masterfully manipulated into understanding and caring about Scrooge himself, in spite of his flaws.

Scrooge's change is portrayed through his actions and his words. He becomes good because of the events of the story. He changes, and in that change we see what Dickens intended. We get a glimpse of what Dickens believed about the ultimate meaning of life.

Most stories use some variation of the character change, though often less dramatically. The question to ask yourself as you craft your novel is, How will my Hero change? What will he learn?



*“Nothing you write,
if you hope to be
good, will ever
come out as you
first hoped.”*

- Lillian Hellman

Revelation

A Hero does not always change from bad to good. Sometimes it is from foolish to wise, or from ignorant to enlightened. Sometimes it is just a change in the way a character sees the world. Sometimes it is from good to better. But it is almost always a positive change; changes from good to bad will irritate your audience.*

Have you ever seen the film *It's a Wonderful Life*? George Bailey is the man who learned better. But we like him from the very beginning. He's a good man. He does good, almost saintly deeds. He's loved and respected by almost everyone.

At the critical moment we understand that he believes a lie. The lie is this: "the world would be better off without me." Which, in itself, is a rather noble kind of thing to believe. George Bailey, in his moment of crisis, doesn't seem to be thinking about himself. He's thinking about his family. He decides suicide is the answer.

Help comes in the form of a bumbling angel named Clarence, who saves him from drowning by pretending to be drowning himself. George, being a heroic sort of person, jumps in the river to save Clarence.

But it takes more than that to save George from the lie he has believed. Oh, George admits suicide was a bad idea. It would hurt his children. It would be better if he had never been born. In desperation, Clarence grants George the miracle he doesn't think possible. He erases George's life and shows him how the world would be different if he had never lived.

The change is dramatic. George's brother, Harry, died as a young boy when he fell through the ice while skating. George wasn't there to save him. Soldiers on a troop ship also died because a Japanese plane sank their ship. Harry, who had been a heroic pilot, wasn't there to save them because George wasn't there to save him.

One by one the changes mount. We see the goodness of George's seemingly plain life add up to heroic proportions.

The climax of the movie comes when George rejects the lie of purposelessness and says, "I want to live again." His character changes from good to great. And it happens because of a powerful revelation shown to us, the audience, as it is shown to him.

Revelation is the cause of any character change. Revelation is what The Man Who Learned Better learns. And it is what he learns that makes him a different man, and a better man.

SETTING BOUNDARIES

Sometimes revelation comes in the form of a reinterpretation of the events of the story. That is, because of some new information, we look back at the rest of the story and see its events in a different way.

This is the technique used in *I remember mama*. Uncle Chris is considered a drunken old man. In the climactic scene, we see the characters waiting around for him to die, wondering how much money he left behind.

But there is no money. He spent it all on medical bills; not for himself, but for lame children. And suddenly we find new respect for the drunken old man, and the earlier events of the story begin to make more sense.

How will revelation change your hero? What will he learn? How will he be different at the end of your novel??

Reading: *The Prisoner of Zenda*, chapter 9.

* I'm not ignoring tragedies. Even a tragedy like *Romeo and Juliet* depends upon positive character change. But it is the warring houses (and the audience) who learn the lesson. The Men Who Learned Better are Capulet and Montague. On the last page of the play we find:

PRINCE: Where be these enemies? Capulet, Montague,
 See what scourge is laid upon your hate,
 That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love.

CAPULET: O brother Montague, give me thy hand.
 This is my daughter's jointure, for no more
 Can I demand.