

Chapter Three

The Structure of the Third Act

Okay. So the objective of the screenwriter is to raise a question in the first act and answer it in the third, along with answering the question of the main character's desire, if that is a separate question.

How do you do that?

Well, much of it is dependent upon the story you choose to write. And some of it is just plain common sense. But a great deal of it is wide open. A wrong choice here or there and your ending will turn out badly. And that is the lasting impression your script will leave in the mind of the reader.

One way to avoid this is to look at the structure of the typical third act. Regardless of the type of story, there are at least four common elements to every third act. On the surface, they may seem simple and self-evident. And yet writers—including rich, famous, credited writers—sometimes make the mistake of not paying careful enough attention to each of these elements.

In addition, there is often a fifth element that is used by the writer in the third act. Not every script demands this fifth element. But when the circumstances call for it, the inclusion of this scene or scenes will make a huge difference in how your ending is received.

So what are these elements?

The four essential parts to every third act are as follows:

- (1) The setup of the final battle
- (2) The final battle
- (3) The outcome of the final battle
- (4) The denouement

The optional fifth element is something I call “the bridge.”

Notice that three of these elements involve something called “the final battle.” Once again, I didn’t invent the concept. Linda Seger makes mention of something similar in her fine book *Making a Good Script Great*. And Michael Hauge refers to something he calls the “final confrontation” in his equally fine *Writing Screenplays That Sell*. Same thing, different words.

The notion of a “final battle” is not new or unique. But breaking down the structure of the third act into elements surrounding that notion has not yet been explored. Still, every writer who has written a screenplay in three acts for a successful and well-received film has most likely included the four elements I have listed above.

If successful writers already do this, why is it important to even talk about?

Because every unsuccessful writer of a three-act script most likely has failed to include one or more of those four elements in his or her third act. Or if they did include them, they may have neglected to properly set up the final battle or tailor it and its outcome to the question that was raised at the end of their first act.

Remember our second act? That long, imposing, difficult to write second act? What was that all about again?

Obstacles. Mounting obstacles. Obstacles that grow in difficulty until our main character reaches the point in the story where the second-act plot point spins it around in a new direction.

Well, when that happens, what is there waiting for our main character? Quite simply, another obstacle! Only this obstacle is far more difficult than any they faced in act two. If it’s not, then it

isn't worth reading/watching any more. If our main character has already faced their biggest challenge somewhere in the second act, everything after that is a letdown.

In a three-act script, the biggest obstacle for our main character must come right before the end. It should be the mother of all obstacles. Often, if we writers are doing our job right, it's the thing our main character has been fearing the most. And just as often, it couldn't come at a worse time. The more inconvenient, the better. As in: now we'll really get to see what he or she is made of. After all, isn't that why we watch movies in the first place?

In the next five chapters, we will explore each of these elements of the third act in greater detail. But before we do that, let's examine how we go about creating that huge, seemingly insurmountable obstacle for our main character in the third act.

I mentioned earlier that the obstacle could be our character's biggest fear. In *Jaws*, for instance, Sheriff Martin Brody fears the water more than anything, maybe even more than that shark. So what becomes Brody's biggest obstacle as we head into the third act?

Early on in the third act, we learn that the boat Brody is on is not going to provide adequate protection from the shark for him and Quint and Hooper. To make matters worse, Quint destroys the radio so that they cannot even place a call for help. So when that boat begins to sink, there is only one place for Brody to go. You guessed it: into the water.

As we know by now, Brody hates the water. But he's also developed a pretty good fear of that two-ton shark. That's a pretty good combination—Brody going into the water, with the shark.

Instead of our main character's biggest fear, sometimes the obstacle that they are to face in the third act is something that has been looming in the distance and can no longer be avoided. At the end of the first act in *Rocky*, our hero accepts the challenge to fight Apollo Creed. The fight is already scheduled. The day is going to come. He knows it and we know it. And so it must come. And we know this obstacle will be a lot more difficult than running up the

steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum or punching the sides of beef at the meat-packing plant where Paulie works.

In stories like this, the writer's choice is simple. But in that case, the lead-up to the obstacle and the choreography thereof often become the greater challenge for the writer.

But what about something like *Saving Private Ryan*? Here the choices facing Robert Rodat (the screenwriter) were many and varied. Captain Miller had no "biggest fear." Heck, he was living his biggest fear every day he was in uniform. So how does the writer make a choice in a story like this?

William Goldman, writing about this very thing in *The Big Picture* (Applause, 2000), claimed that he was disappointed with the third act of *Saving Private Ryan*. He said that once Miller found Ryan, he thought they were going to turn around and head back and really face some obstacles.

Now, I'm not one to disagree with Mr. Goldman. Not often anyway. He is an icon whom I admire greatly. (My students would probably use the word "idolize.") In fact, when I first read Goldman's take on this, I agreed. But over time, I switched sides, and now believe that Rodat and Spielberg made an excellent choice to have Miller and his men stay and help Ryan and his makeshift platoon defend the bridge.

Why? Well, to take the approach Goldman suggested would have meant a third act with more than one obstacle. And those obstacles would have had to increase in intensity. Which is a lot like a second act. Which means Goldman's proposed third act would be a *second* second act.

In some ways I can understand Goldman's suggestion. After all, the third act in *Butch Cassidy* is really a second second act and a very short third act all rolled into one. But that is hard to pull off if your name isn't William Goldman.

In *Private Ryan*, the choices facing Rodat and Spielberg were many. But all those choices had to involve the German forces behind whose lines the Americans were, and who outnumbered the American troops by a considerable margin.

So where to take Miller and his men in the third act? Have them retrace their steps? No. We'd already been there. That violates one of the basic rules of screenwriting (and moviemaking): don't repeat yourself. And they couldn't very well keep going to Berlin. So what does that leave?

Defend the bridge. Ryan's refusal to leave his men makes sense to us. So does their order to defend the bridge at all cost. And so does Miller's decision to stay and help. An excellent choice by the filmmakers. (More on this in the next five chapters.)

The writers of *Gladiator* faced a similar problem. You'll recall that the second-act plot point was Maximus joining with Gracchus and the emperor's sister to arrange for Maximus to escape and return with his army and defeat Commodus, thereby restoring the republic just as Marcus Aurelius had requested in the beginning of the first act. Personally, I was looking forward to this. That would have made for one heck of a final battle, I thought. So I was rather disappointed when Commodus thwarted Maximus's plan and killed Cicero and arrested Gracchus. No escape. No round-up. No marching back to Rome. No rousing battle of two armies.

Screenwriting is all about choices. And the writers of *Gladiator* made a different choice. And, upon further examination, they were probably correct.

In order for Maximus to round up his army, prepare for a major invasion, and attack Rome, it would have taken up some considerable screen time. Not only that, but Maximus would have had to eventually take on Commodus one-on-one anyway. That's just how it works. Our hero must take on and defeat the villain. It can't be left up to some other character. It can't be a stray arrow or the tip of a sword wielded by someone other than the main character that causes the defeat of the villain. (Unless the main character sets in motion the events that inexorably cause such a conclusion.) It must be face-to-face, with the hero clearly over-matched. Think Apollo Creed versus Rocky Balboa.

If Maximus had assembled his army and invaded Rome, the writers still would have had to put him in a position where he was

one-on-one with Commodus, without any help from his lieutenants or any others in his army. Which means a lot of activity to get where they got anyway.

And with whom would the army have fought up until that point? Faceless, nameless soldiers? Other than Commodus, there were no other villains who would be worthy opponents for Maximus and his army.

Upon further analysis, the writers made a good choice. Skip all the extracurricular activity and get right to the one-on-one battle between Commodus and Maximus.

But wait. Didn't I say the main character had to be overmatched? How could Commodus overmatch Maximus, the MVP of the gladiator league, in a one-on-one battle? Well, if you recall, this was accomplished quite simply and in keeping with the character of Commodus. He cheated. He stabbed Maximus in the back. Literally. Just prior to the fight. Not enough to kill him immediately, but enough to significantly inhibit his fighting ability—so much so that Maximus was literally bleeding to death as he tangled with Commodus. And he still won!

The lesson in all of this is that whenever your final obstacle is not an inevitable event, such as the fight in *Rocky*, you must somehow figure out how to get your hero face-to-face with his antagonist. And for maximum impact, you must have the hero be overmatched. If you have created a good movie villain, that should already be the case. If not, some clever writing, such as that in *Gladiator*, must be employed.

And if there is no singular, human villain as in *Private Ryan*, your choice must make both logical and cinematic sense. And it must put your hero in a place where they are at maximum risk. Chief Brody in the water with the shark is a good example.

Now, this is all well and good when one is talking about action movies or even movies where there is a clear “villain.” But what about in “character pieces”? What about when the main character isn't at risk physically? How does one get their character to face their greatest obstacle in the third act?

In those instances, the choices become more difficult. Or do they?

We'll talk more about this when we discuss "the final battle." But for now, let's turn our attention to how we "set up" that final confrontation.