"The Play's The Thing……"

PLAY SUBMISSIONS HELPER

"The Play's the Thing…."

Participant Notes

Podcast Seven: Inciting Incident/ Supporting Characters

"The Play's The Thing……"

Introduction

Welcome

This podcast is the seventh in a series on the key elements of playwriting.

The Learning Aids

Each podcast has a brief handout that goes with it which will make it easier for you to follow along with the content. This is that handout.

There is a series of handouts, one for each of the learning topics. The handouts list key points and make it easier to follow along with the podcast, particularly if you are a visual learner. You may wish to download and print out the handout, particularly if you are going to be listening to the podcast in a location which allows you to follow along with simple notes. The podcast will still be useful without the handout, so if you can't print it out, don't worry about it. Occasional references to specific page numbers will be made in the podcast for clarity. The podcast includes some follow-up assignments which are designed to deepen your understanding of the topic. Those assignments are also written down at the end of the handout.

Who Am I? (Andrew Black, Playwright and Learning Host)

Andrew Black wrote his first play, a romantic comedy, with a collaborator, Patricia Milton, in 2001. That play (a romantic comedy called *Porn Yesterday*) was a finalist in a national playwriting contest in 2002 and was produced for the first time in 2003. *Porn* has now been produced across the country. Andrew and Patricia collaborated on three more plays, and then Andrew began to write on his own. Eventually, he received an MFA in playwriting in 2012, from Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. Now a resident of Indianapolis, he teaches at the Indiana Writers Center there. His plays are produced throughout the United States. Andrew also has a degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology. He feels that his background in instructional design and his artistic talent qualify him in a unique way to teach playwriting. For more info, visit www.andrewblackplaywright.com

PSH is a community of more than 1700 playwrights. Its goal is to help playwrights realize their dream of getting a play produced by saving them hours of time searching for theaters to which work can be submitted. For just $6.99/month, PSH provides a compendium of hundreds of theaters and organizations that are accepting play submissions. It's the perfect system for a busy playwright who wants to focus on the craft of writing. Sign up now by going to www.playsubmissionshelper.com!

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Introduction (Continued)

Podcast Seven Agenda

- o Welcome/Start-Up's
- o The Handout
- o Who Am I? (Your host, Andrew Black, playwright, and your sponsor, Play Submissions Helper)

- Teaching Examples Used in this Podcast
- Inciting Incident: What and Why?
  - o What Is an Inciting Incident?
  - o Why Is It Important?
  - o Kinds of Plots/Different Kinds of Inciting Incidents
  - o Putting the Inciting Incident on Stage
- Supporting Characters
  - o What Are Supporting Characters/How Do They Function?
  - o Supporting Characters as Parts of the Protagonist's Psyche
  - o Supporting Characters who Comment on Theme
  - o Supporting Characters as Archetypes
  - o Giving Every Supporting Character a Distinct Point of View
- In Summary

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Teaching Examples

One of the challenges of teaching playwriting is that it is helpful to use examples from great plays. However, not all playwrights have read all plays. I would suggest that aspiring playwrights do need to familiarize themselves with the great works and if need be, seek them out.

This podcast will use five well-known plays/stories as its teaching examples: Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun*, Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (movie version, 1939*)*, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House,* and Meredith Willson's *The Music Man.*
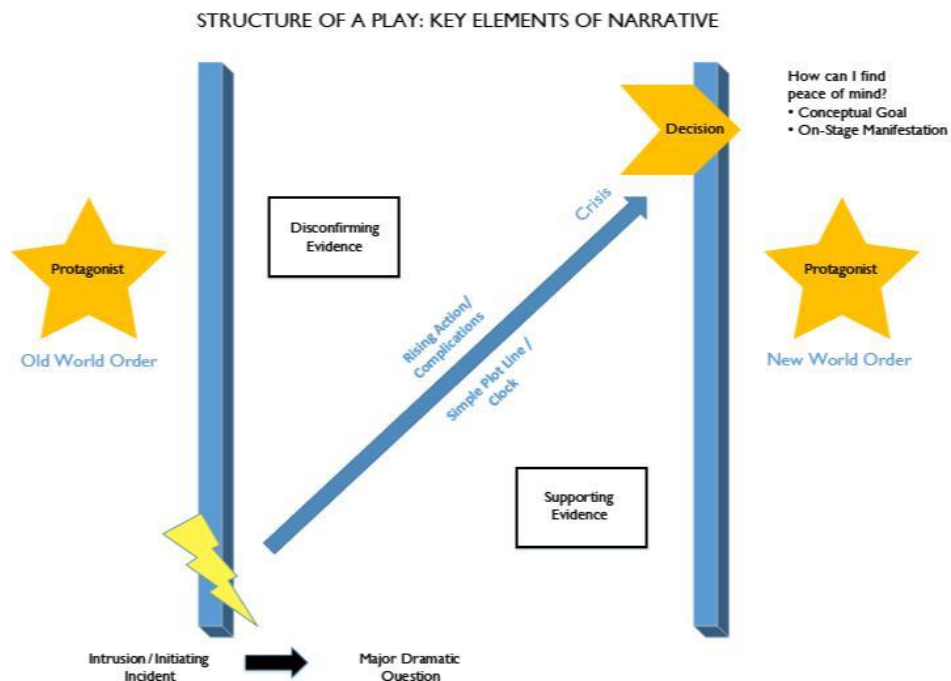
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Inciting Incident: What and Why?

What Is an Inciting Incident?

The inciting incident in a theatrical narrative or play is a dramatic event which takes place near the beginning of the play's *plot*. It is an event which upsets the protagonist's apple cart and introduces a major dramatic question (MDQ) which will organize and structure elements of the plot which follow.

The following schematic shows how these various elements fit together. The inciting incident is depicted as a lightning bolt.

STRUCTURE OF A PLAY: KEY ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVE

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The *Inciting Incident* is called the "Intrusion/ Initiating Incident" in this diagram. These elements are the same. One thing that most theorists agree on is the importance of this narrative element. They don't agree on what to call it, which is why there are a few different names, which are used interchangeably.

Why Is the Inciting Incident Important?

The inciting incident answers the question: What just happened that the story should start here?

The playwright makes a choice about where to start the story. The term which is used to define this choice (the specific location in the story) is called the point of attack. Some theorists distinguish between "story" and "plot". The "story" is everything that is contained in the narrative including exposition and back story. The "plot" is everything that happens on the stage.

Every playwright has to decide where exactly to start the story; part of this choice will be driven by decisions about the identity of the protagonist and the kind of plot the playwright is working with. Another factor is the decision about how to create a Major Dramatic Question (MDQ) which will drive the narrative. The inciting incident serves to provide the dramatic juice to start the plot off with a bang, whatever location the playwright has chosen for the point of attack.

The inciting incident serves as a booster rocket that propels the protagonist beyond the gravitational pull of earth and catapults him/her into theatrical outer space. Without this explosion, a protagonist's decision can seem unmotivated and therefore "lame". A strong inciting incident helps overcome this confound and engages the audience in the hero's journey.

There is another reason for the inclusion of a strong inciting incident. By design, the audience should identify with the protagonist. Audiences in general like powerful protagonists. They do not like victims, and they don't want to identify with a victim. The audience will be constantly assessing their willingness to identify with the "hero". If the audience suspects that the hero has tried to achieve a particular goal several times before and failed, the audience members will be reluctant to invest in him / her emotionally. The inciting incident lets the

audience know that today, the beginning of the play, is significantly different than any other day in the life of the protagonist. Today is Different.

If the design of the play is such that the hero will not achieve his goal in the end, the playwright has to guard against the risk of losing audience interest in the character and his / her struggle. It may be that the character will not achieve the goal but will achieve something else that is just as good or better. It may be that the story is based on an underlying belief that the universe is inherently random and that no one ever really achieves anything. It may be that the current circumstances of the hero in this particular situation are such that he or she could not possibly have achieved the goal he or she set out to achieve.

Even in these plays, the audience needs to believe that the hero has some chance of achieving the goal in order to maintain engagement, suspense and then heighten the impact of the final outcome. Perhaps it is only hero who believes in that possibility, but we must believe in it through the hero.

Kinds of Plots/Different Kinds Inciting Incidents

Almost any life event can serve as an inciting incident if correctly positioned. In classic plays, there are classic inciting incidents. A death is frequently the kick off to a play because death is a situation which changes things for the survivors, and it is a situation which is non-negotiable. Once the person is gone, usually, they're gone. Unexpectedly coming into money could be another once-in-a-lifetime experience which could be used as an intrusion. Frequently, supernatural elements kick off the play.

The arrival of a mysterious stranger is frequently the inciting incident that kicks off many a story. However, "a man going on a journey" in and of itself is not an intrusion; it is a plot. The reason the man went on the trip is the intrusion. Simply deciding to go somewhere is not in and of itself an intrusion.

Other common life events--a marriage or a birth--can be a transformative one-of-a-kind life event. An old friend re-entering one's life after many years away or simply the receipt of an unexpected letter (or email) could disturb the peace of mind of the protagonist and introduce a Major Dramatic Question.

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Christopher Booker relates seven different basic "plots" which can have different kinds of inciting incidents. In "Overcoming the Monster" the hero typically experiences a "call" to fight evil. He / she may have a special skill or talent that is required. Even better if he / she is temperamentally unsuited to fighting evil, but (for instance) his / her degree in mathematics provides special knowledge no one else has. Therefore he / she is "called" to fight the monster.

A similar kind of "call" exists in a "Quest" narrative ("A man goes on a trip"). The protagonist is typically someone who is a "stay at home" and so the action of "questing" is not something that would come normally to him or her. However, something has gone terribly wrong in the world around the hero, and the option to stay home is no longer a legitimate one.

The "Rags to Riches" plot usually involves a younger person. If the hero of your play is young, you have more leeway with your intrusion. Many of the circumstances of a young person is coming of age serve as reasonable inciting incidents. Going to college, moving out on one's own for the first time, or graduating from high school are examples. In a "Rags to Riches" plot, something calls out to an unhappy young person to take action.

In "Voyage and Return", the protagonist "falls" into an unfamiliar world and must apply energy to getting back to where he or she came from. Typically, the Old World Order for the protagonist includes him / her being in a state which leaves him / her open to new experiences. At the top of the story, the consciousness of the protagonist is usually in some ways limited.

In a "Tragedy," which deals with a protagonist making an unfortunate choice and suffering for it, the intrusion is the temptation to do something which, strictly speaking, is unethical or at least a very bad idea.

Putting the Inciting Incident on Stage

The inherently dramatic nature of the *Inciting Incident* means that the playwright should have a very good reason not to include it as part of the plot. In other words, the playwright would want to consider putting the incident on stage.

In some cases, the inciting incident may involve characters who will not reappear later in the play. One principle of playwriting is that all characters on stage need

to "carry their own weight". To justify the presence of an actor to play a part, the character needs to be central enough to the plot and theme to justify their presence. In other words, they would probably have a substantial amount of stage time. If the inciting incident involves characters who will have little stage time, the playwright must be creative.

Playwrights may avoid writing scenes that they know will be difficult which, of course, is a very poor reason not to write a scene. The initiating incident may not find its way on stage because the writer knows that writing that scene would be a challenge.

Playwrights who are considering excluding the inciting incident may want to write the scene anyway, at least as a writing exercise. Then, the writer can re-decide whether to include the scene or what adjustments might need to be made to allow it to be included. It may not be included at all and will then simply inform the rest of the stage action.

This discussion is not to say that the intrusion can never be left out. There may be good reasons to omit it, but the decision should be a conscious choice on the part of the playwright, not a decision that is made without consideration of other options.

Finally, in classic play construction, the intrusion should occur early in the story. Some theorists are quite dogmatic and state that the intrusion must happen no later than page 10, or it must occur on the first page of a ten-minute play. No rule is quite that hard and fast, of course. In principle, however, the intrusion must happen early enough in the story so that the audience does not begin to wonder when something is going to happen.

Supporting Characters

What Are Supporting Characters/How Do They Function?

Supporting characters are characters in the play, other than the protagonist, whose function is support (or inhibit) the protagonist as he / she pursues the goal

or to provide a different perspective on the protagonist's character/journey as the audience tracks him / her.

In theater, the audience members can enter a "trance" state as they watch a play. They so completely identify with the protagonist that it begins to feel as if they are having a dream, the dream of the protagonist.

A principle from dream interpretation that I apply here is that "all parts of the dream are you." As applied: if you have a dream about a co-worker, you are not dreaming about your literal co-worker (John or Susan), you are dreaming about the part of yourself that is, in some way, like that co-worker. If John is very aggressive and a bully, you may be dreaming about the part of you which is or might like to be more aggressive. If Susan is very creative, when you dream about Susan, you are likely to be dreaming about your own sense of creativity.

Sometimes, this symbolic content is called "disowned material" in that we may be uncomfortable for psychological reasons with our own aggression or creativity, and we project it onto others. In our dreams, we project it onto other people who serve as the symbol for that quality we are struggling with, like John or Susan. Frequently, the message in the dream is to "deal with" or integrate our own "disowned material" to become healthier functioning people.

Supporting Characters as Parts of the Protagonist's Psyche

Likewise, in plays, the protagonist is a complex individual who is likely to have conflicting views on his / her own journey. The supporting characters can then provide the "voice" of those conflicting views as the hero struggles on his / her way. If, for instance, the protagonist's goal is to spend the night in a haunted house to prove that he is a "man", he might have two conflicting voices within him. The different voices can be given life in the play as characters who represent the two points of view held by the leading character.

Typically, protagonists have allies who support them on the way to their goal and adversaries who hinder them. In some interesting cases, the ally becomes an adversary or vice versa. As you populate the world of your play consider how your protagonist might have different kinds of allies and adversaries. And then, write them.

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Supporting Characters who Comment on the Theme

Assuming that the playwright has determined the theme of the play, the playwright can populate the world with supporting characters who provide different points of view on the theme.

These various permutations on the theme allow the writer to explore different facets of the theme through the supporting characters, each of whose adventures comment on the protagonist's own dramatic objective.

Supporting Characters as Archetypes

Another approach to developing supporting characters is to consider characteristic human types which appear during one's life. There are schools of theater which are populated by characteristic "types". For instance, the classic melodrama has the virtuous hero, the innocent damsel and the evil villain (characterized in cartoons as Dudley Do-right, Nell Fenwick, and Snidely Whiplash). Commedia Dell'Arte has its own stock characters such as Pantaloon (a self-centered buffoon), the Harlequin (a wily servant), and Columbine (a smart and down-to-earth young woman). Typically, these traditional types are characters who are very broad and allow the audience to quickly identify what type of characters they are dealing with and what their motivations and problems are likely to be. They are not typically used in sophisticated story telling but can serve as a guide to types of supporting characters to consider in a story.

Another (similar) way of looking at types is through the concept of psychological "archetypes" which is based on a set of concepts advanced by the psychologist Carl Jung. Archetypes draw on typical roles/prototypes that we see fulfilled by other people as we pass through our lives. For example, two of the primary roles that we experience as the "protagonist" of our own lives are "mother" and "father". Frequently, plays will contain characters which represent "mother", "father" or "parent" energy. These characters speak to the influence a mother or father might have on the protagonist's journey through the play. These "archetypes" could be further sub-divided into "good mother" and "bad mother" and "good father" and "bad father".

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Some of these archetypes are as follows: Patriarch, Busybody, False Friend, Pillar of the Community, Stud, Vixen, Tragedy Queen, Joker, Caregiver, and Tempter. The playwright is encouraged to explore these various archetypes independently as a way of determining what kinds of supporting characters might populate a play. This exploration can be through research on archetypes or by just watching and reading other plays and seeing how different archetypes show up.

When dealing with archetypes, it is easy to allow these characters to become one dimensional. The "busybody" or Gladys Kravitz character is often used for comic effect; however, taking the time to build a real character out of the archetype pays off as it will enrich the play and the audience's relationship to it.

No matter what source of inspiration the playwright uses for the supporting characters, it is important to consider developing characters that are well-founded and full-bodied to deepen the story telling and engage the audience.

**Giving Every Supporting Character a Distinct Point of View**

One last principle for effective supporting characters is to give each a distinctive function and point of view. All the supporting characters need to be given different voices/points of view, or one of them should probably be excised from the play. Once again, every character on stage needs to carry his or her own weight.

In Summary

In this podcast we've talked about the inciting incident, what it is and why it is important. It is the force that kicks off the story and propels the protagonist into action, introducing the Major Dramatic Question. Its use helps the audience invest in the protagonist's journey, and playwrights should consider putting it in as part of the plot, usually early in the story.

Supporting characters can be seen as refractions of the protagonist's psyche. They often comment on theme and can be drawn for the stockpile of archetypes available in other plays and from the literature of psychology. In the next podcast, we will build on what we learned here, and look at one of my favorite topics: plot.

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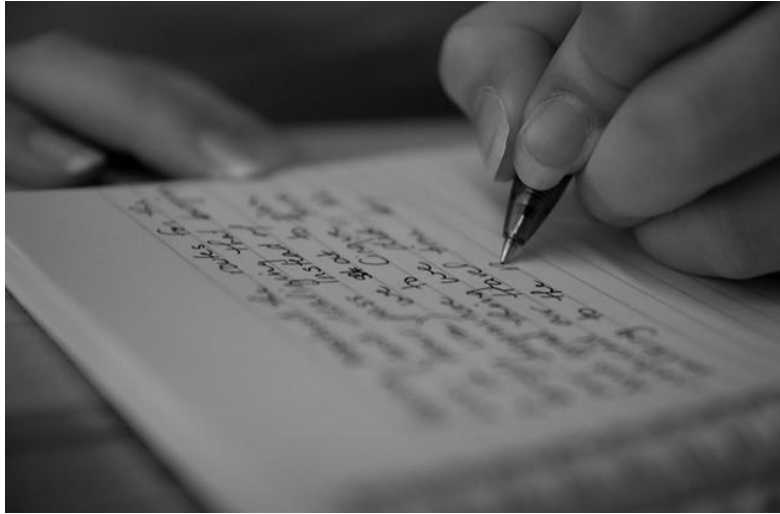
Food for thought.

You may wish to get a "Playwright's Journal" if you don't already have one.

1. Think about a play, one that you really like. See if you can identify the inciting incident. What is the event in the play that seems to kick off the action and introduces the major dramatic question of the play?

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2. Once you have identified the inciting incident, ask whether the incident takes place on stage or off.

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3. For the play you are working on: make sure you have a clear inciting incident. What is it? What happens to the protagonist early on in the story that disturbs his / her peace of mind, compelling the protagonist to take action?

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4. For the play you are working on: If you do not show the inciting incident on stage, write the scene where the inciting incident happens and see what you learn from writing that scene.

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5. Go back to the play that you really like. Identify the characters that surround the protagonist or hero in that play. What appears to be their function?

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6. For the play you are working on, list the supporting characters and see if you can describe what their psychological relationship is to the MDQ or to the theme of the play? If you are having trouble coming up with this, consider how you can shape the character to give him / her a clearer point of view.

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7. For the play you are working on: take the list of characters from your play. If you were to describe each using only one or two adjectives, what adjectives would you use? If the adjectives are too similar (or the same) consider how you could shift the point of view of the character to heighten distinctions between them.

8. For the play you are working on: Do a web search and find a list of common archetypes. Which of the essential energies is most missing from your play? If you were to add a character representing that archetype, who would it be? Could you shift one of your existing supporting characters into that archetype?

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