

“The Play’s the Thing....”

## **Participant Notes**

**Podcast Nine: Crisis, Climax and Resolution**

# “The Play’s The Thing.....”



## The PSH Podcast Series: The Play’s the Thing

### Introduction Welcome

This podcast is the ninth 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.

The handout lists key points and makes it easier to follow along with the podcast, particularly if you are a visual learner. You may wish to print out the handout, especially if you are going to be listening to the podcast in a location which allows you to follow along. The podcast can be followed 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 found 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](http://www.andrewblackplaywright.com)

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## Play Submissions Helper (Series Sponsor)



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](http://www.playsubmissionshelper.com)!

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## Introduction (Continued)

### Podcast Nine Agenda

- Welcome/Start-Up’s
- The Handout
- Who Am I? (Your host, Andrew Black, playwright, and your sponsor, Play Submissions Helper)
- The Teaching Examples in this Podcast
- Crisis
  - What Is Crisis and How Does It Function?
  - Examples
- Climax
  - What Is Climax and How Does It Function?
  - Examples
- Resolution
  - What Is Resolution and Why Is It Important?
  - Examples
- How Do Crisis, Climax and Resolution Relate to the Other Key Elements of Narrative?
  - Crisis, Climax, Resolution in Context
  - Crisis, Climax, Resolution and Theme
- In Summary

## 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 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*.

## Crisis

### What Is Crisis and How Does It Function?

For the purposes of this podcast, I will be defining these terms in a specific way. It is helpful to note that not all theorists use these terms the same way, and some theorists refer to these elements by other names.

In this podcast, Crisis refers to the final obstacle that the protagonist faces before the Major Dramatic Question is answered. The worst possible thing that could possibly happen to the protagonist happens. At the point of Crisis, something gets broken that, from the audience's perspective, can never be fixed. The audience should be rooting for the protagonist. If properly built, the protagonist will have engendered a great deal of empathy from the audience which will be rooting for him / her to fulfill the quest and get that thing that he / she thinks will provide peace of mind. Often, the playwright will have built an ethical sense of rightness about the quest. Not only are we rooting for the protagonist to get it, but, in some way, the quest seems morally justified by now. We want the hero to overcome the monster, find the treasure or become the princess. (In the case of a Tragedy, we should be hoping that somehow at the last minute, the protagonist will right the ship and prevent inevitable doom.) Then at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, something happens which could conceivably dash all those dreams.

Something takes place which would seem to make it impossible for the hero / heroine to achieve the goal. That is the Crisis.

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The Crisis significantly raises the suspense at the play’s conclusion. In most stories, the hero will eventually find a way to overcome even this final obstacle, but to fully engage the audience’s emotions, we must suspect and fear that the goal will never be realized. The belief (sometimes mistaken) that the hero / heroine will not be able to achieve the goal allows the audience to experience delight and surprise when, in fact, the protagonist overcomes the obstacle. There should be a great sense of relief when the goal is achieved. (This phenomenon is part of what provides the audience with an emotional experience or catharsis, in which they have so bonded with the protagonist psychologically that they feel the pain of loss and the joy of victory.)

This emotional journey parallels the emotional journey of the audience through life. Whatever it is that an audience member may want in life outside the theater (reconciliation with a loved one, a new job, to win a contest), it is likely that the audience member will experience ups and downs on the path to that goal. At some point, the audience member may experience circumstances which would on the surface appear to scuttle the possibility that the goal will be achieved. Getting to experience this mini-death of a vision and then, experience its rebirth in the theater, parallels experiences that most audience members have had one or more times in their lives (and may be having as they watch the play).

Frequently, less experienced playwrights leave out the crisis, and the play generally suffers for it. The protagonist is able to resolve the dilemma too easily and to a certain extent the fun is taken out of it. While at the point of Crisis, the protagonist may be close to achieving the goal, and the Crisis may be that he/she has a change of heart at the last minute and runs the risk of ruining everything. Here, the crisis is caused by the protagonist’s sown character. This situation requires a protagonist who was built with enough ambivalence that this turn of events is believable. Most people experience a high level of ambivalence about getting something they want for multiple reasons, and this ambivalence can reflect an important aspect of human nature and makes for a more interesting protagonist.

## Climax

### What is Climax and How Does It Function

In this podcast, the term Climax refers to the moment when the protagonist makes a decisive choice which is designed to overcome the obstacle which, seemingly, cannot be overcome. Typically, the decision or choice made here is a heroic one. The protagonist may give up his/her life for someone else, do the thing that he/she said he/she would never do, or acts in a way that is almost of complete contradiction of the values that he/she espoused prior to that moment. The fearful intellectual picks up a sword to do battle with the dragon, the woman who has been living as a man to get what she wants finally reveals herself as a woman, the rebellious teenage runaway decides to go back home and face his parents.

This choice typically helps reveal the theme or central idea of the play. The core idea is that getting what one wants (overcoming the monster, revealing one's brilliance, coming back to life) is not an easy task and requires sacrifice.

Philosophically, things that are worth having usually do not come easily. The play reveals the writer's idea about what it takes to get what one wants.....courage, truthfulness, a willingness to assume responsibility.

Climax is important because it requires the active protagonist to make a difficult choice. The protagonist has been the stand-in for the audience members so far, and in making this choice, the protagonist fulfills the audience's need to overcome and achieve. It also provides insight into what might be required if audience members are to overcome and achieve.

Further, since Climax is linked to the underlying meaning associated with the story, it elevates the material. If the audience has been sitting watching the story for some time, investing in what they have seen, the climax provides the payoff for the audience and takes the content to a higher level. It stops being just a story and becomes a story about something.

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## Resolution

### What Is Resolution and How Does It Function?

Resolution, then, is where the audience gets information that helps them understand the meaning of what they have seen. Here, the playwright illustrates a point of view about life through the metaphoric lens of the conclusion of the story. This sequence is: A terrible obstacle is encountered (Crisis), and a heroic action is engaged in (Climax). The ensuing events allow the audience to make conclusions about what they have seen: Resolution.

If the protagonist who performed an act of courage, gets what he/she wants and has a happy ending, it probably means that the writer believes that if the audience member demonstrates courage with respect to an obstacle, the audience member will likely experience happiness as well. Perhaps the protagonist demonstrates courage and doesn't get what he/she wants but gets something else which is even better. In this case, the meaning may be that courage is a good thing, and sometimes, you must be careful what you ask for.

Typically, in theatre, meaning is revealed metaphorically. Resolution works hand in hand with the Old and New World Order, and meaning is revealed indirectly through story clues provided by the playwright.



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The audience assesses what they see happening with the protagonist in the aftermath of the Climax to interpret how the protagonist’s world has changed for the better (or worse) because of the events of the plot. Usually, the elements the audience were tracking were set up early in the play and pay off during this section as the audience gets to see what happened.

For the playwright, the challenge of resolution is taking the story and figuring out what the protagonist has learned and whether he / she is happy with the outcome or not. Once that is done, the playwright must determine how to reveal that information to the audience without saying (as they do in the cartoon *South Park*): “We learned a lesson here today.....”

There are a wide variety of possible arcs to the story and its resolution. The table below suggests some possible choice curves for resolving the story.

The protagonist Gets/Doesn’t Get	And....	Outcome	Example
Gets what he / she wants		Is happy (and is better off, having learned something)	<i>Wizard of Oz</i>
Doesn’t get what he / she wants	Gets something else	Is happy anyway (Or is better off....smarter, enlightened, or better adjusted)	<i>Raisin in the Sun, Doll’s House, Music Man, Christmas Carol</i>
Gets what he / she wants	Finds out it wasn’t all that great	Is happy anyway (or is in some other way better off)	<i>August: Osage County, Good People</i>
Gets what he / she wants	Finds out it wasn’t all that great (or that there is a big problem with it)	Is tragically unhappy	<i>Hamlet, Oedipus, Macbeth, Frankenstein</i>

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## How Do Crisis, Climax and Resolution Relate to the Other Key Elements of Narrative?

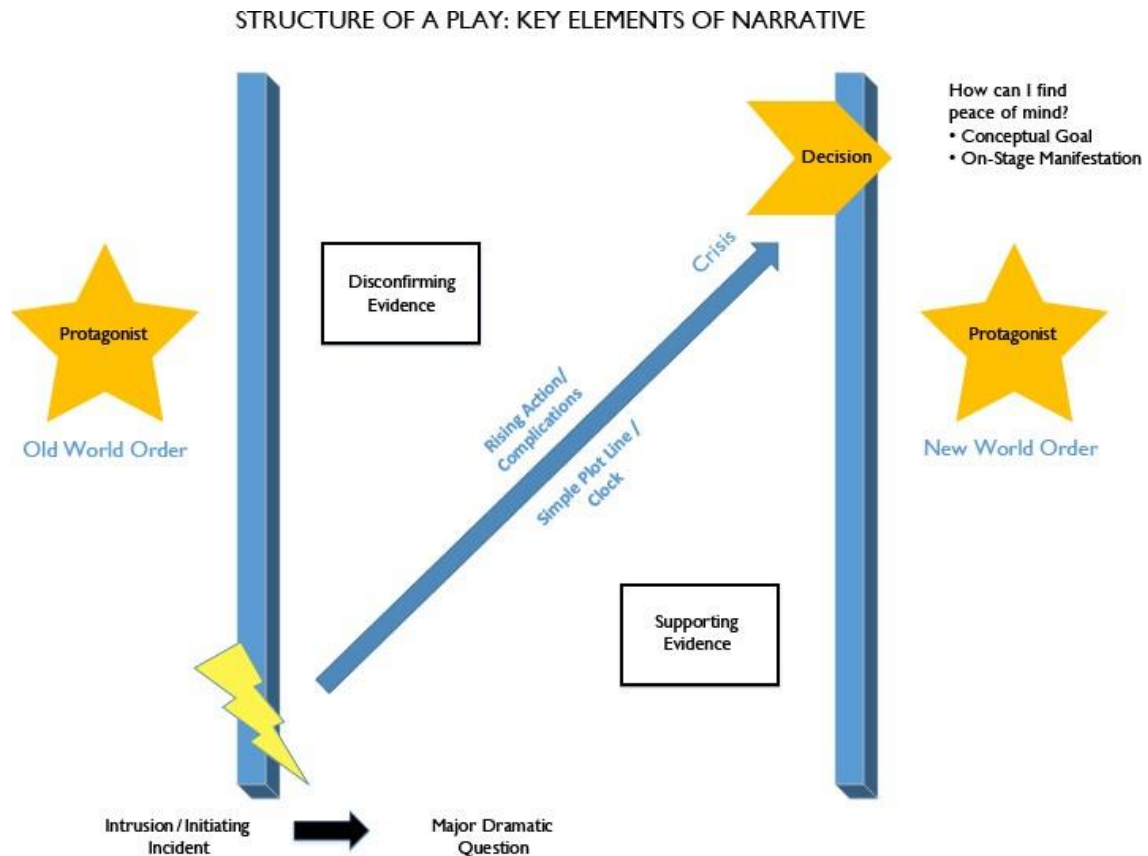
### Crisis, Climax, Resolution in Context

The by-now familiar graph which follows locates the three concepts in the larger context. Crisis is indicated by a single word which appears on the Plot arrow at the upper right. Crisis is the last obstacle, and the last piece of plot.

Climax is depicted as the large yellow arrow at the top right, which says “Decision”. Typically, this point is where the protagonist makes the fateful decision which is termed Climax.

Resolution is everything to the left of the vertical blue line to the right, after the Major Dramatic Question is answered. It bleeds into the New World Order as the audience finds out happens next, and determines what conclusions it can come to about the protagonist and the choices the protagonist has made.

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Crisis, Climax and Resolution function best if they have been set up. If the prince needs to demonstrate courage in order to become king, it needs to be set up in the Old World Order that he was easily frightened, and his timid nature is reflected throughout the story as the plot unfolds.

If the hero needs to shoot the monster in order to overcome it, then the fact that the hero does not want to shoot anyone should clearly be established early on and reinforced as the plot unfolds.

## Crisis, Climax, Resolution and Theme

None of the podcasts up till now have explicitly tackled the issue of theme and have primarily focused on storytelling. Theme is usually implicit and revealed through story and character choices.

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Theme is embedded in stories that we tell about people. This series of story elements function as symbols through which themes are revealed. Much like dreams, these elements may be selected unconsciously and can reveal beliefs or ideas of which the writer may only dimly aware. Even absurdist plays have a theme: life is random, meaningless, and absurd and no matter what you do, it will “get you”.

It can be helpful to consider theme before the play is even written, so that the writer can point to the theme as the story unfolds. Each of the plays I use as teaching examples has a clear theme: Can I find home (*Wizard*)? What does it take to be a man (*Raisin*)? What is the woman’s role in a marriage (*Doll’s House*)? Is it possible to change your path and find love and happiness (*Music Man*)? Is revenge worth it (*Hamlet*)? Each of the writers has clear opinions and they are revealed through plotting and through the actions and choices that take place during Crisis, Climax and Resolution.

## In Summary

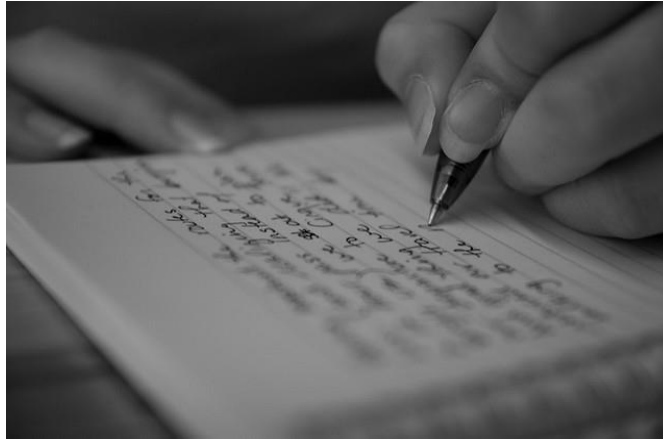
In this podcast we’ve talked about Crisis, Climax and Resolution—what they are and why they are important. We’ve looked at examples of each and seen how these three concepts relate to others we have already talked about. Finally, we talked about theme, and how it is revealed, often through these three elements.

Join us for the next podcast when we will turn from structure and begin to look at process as we talk about The Rewrite.



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## Your Assignments



*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 how the elements of Crisis, Climax and Resolution are used. What appears to be the Crisis? Does the Protagonist make a decision at the Climax? What is it? What is the protagonist’s world like in the aftermath of that decision (Resolution)?

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2. What is the decisive choice the Protagonist makes at the Climax? Is that choice foreshadowed earlier in the play? How does the choice appear to relate to the theme?

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3. For the play you are working on: consider Crisis and Climax. What is the final obstacle the protagonist will encounter on his/her way to the goal? What will get broken that can never be fixed, leading the audience to fear for a moment that all is lost? What decision will the protagonist make at that moment to deal with that obstacle?

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4. For the play you are working on: Consider Resolution. Does the protagonist get what he/she wants? Does he/she get something else instead? Is it better? How does the protagonist feel about how everything turned out? How will you let us know that without simply telling us?

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