

"The Play's The Thing....."

with Andrew Black



Participant Notes

**Podcast Four:
The Protagonist**

“The Play’s The Thing.....”



The PSH Podcast Series: The Play’s the Thing

Introduction

Welcome

This podcast is the fourth 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 learning topic. These handouts list key points on the topic and might make it easier to follow along with the podcast, particularly for the 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 some 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 handouts include some follow-up assignments which are designed to deepen your understanding of the topic. Those assignments will also be discussed in the podcast.

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

Play Submissions Helper (Series Sponsor)



PSH is a community of more than 1700 playwrights. The goal is to help playwrights realize their dream of getting a play produced by saving them hours of time searching for theaters to submit their work to. For just \$6.99/month, PSH provides a compendium of hundreds of theaters that are accepting play submissions. It's the perfect system for a

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busy playwright who wants to focus on the craft of writing. Sign up now by going to playsubmissionshelper.com!

Introduction (Continued)

Podcast Four Agenda

- Welcome/Start-Up's
- The handout
- Who am I? (Your host, Andrew Black, playwright, and your sponsor, Play Submissions Helper)
- Teaching Examples
 - The use of teaching examples
 - Teaching examples used in this podcast
- Typical Characteristics of the Protagonist
 - Drives action
 - Strong want or need, has a goal
 - Fish out of water
 - The story begins and ends with this character.
 - Must deal with conflicts in pursuit of the goal
- Problems that Occur in Developing a Protagonist
 - No clear protagonist
 - Protagonist does not have a clear goal
 - It is not clear what it will look like when the protagonist achieves the goal.
 - Protagonist is one of the least interesting characters in the play.
 - The protagonist is never in true danger or at risk.
 - The protagonist does not make a strong decisive choice at the end of the play.
- Your assignments

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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 these great works and if need be, seek them out.

There are many great protagonists in the world of the theater. We remember them for reasons that will become clear in a minute: Macbeth, Blanche DuBois, Oedipus Rex, Hedda Gabler, John Proctor. This podcast will use five well-known protagonists as its teaching examples: Hamlet from *Hamlet*, Walter Lee Younger from *Raisin in the Sun*, Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, Nora Helmer in *A Doll’s House*, and Harold Hill from *The Music Man*.

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The Protagonist: Who Is the Play About?



A protagonist is the main character (the central or primary personal figure) of a literary, theatrical, cinematic, or musical narrative. This character is the one around whom the events of the narrative's plot revolve and with whom the audience is intended to share the most empathy. It is the character that the audience member will most likely identify with.

An effective play lulls the audience member into a kind of dream state. When done well, the audience will literally forget that it is in a theater and have an out-of-body experience of being someplace else: From the south side of Chicago in 1959, to the country of Denmark in the late middle ages, to the Land of Oz, to River City, Iowa at the turn of the 20th century. The protagonist is the character through whose consciousness the audience member enters the dream world of the play. If the play has a strong protagonist whose point of view is built and maintained over the course of the narrative, the play can have this hypnotic effect on the audience.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this psychological transference. A play which has no clear protagonist simply becomes a story being told. While there is nothing “wrong” with that, a strong play will almost always make a choice about the eyes through which the audience member sees the world of the play.

Typical Characteristics of the Protagonist:

There are a few key characteristics of effective protagonists. These characteristics are not “rules” but guidelines to consider. If you are not following these guidelines, my opinion is that you should have a good reason to do so.

- The character who drives the action of the story. These strong characters make one choice after another that drive the action of the play.
- The character who has the strongest want or need; the character who has a goal. What activates the character is his or her goal. One way to figure out who the protagonist of the play is, is to ask the question: who in the story has the strongest want or need?

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- The character who makes the final key decision of the play or narrative. It is an important element of a protagonist’s existence that he (or she) makes a compelling decision at the end of the narrative. That decision should tell us something about the theme of the play. The narrative of a play need to be constructed so that the protagonist can make a significant decision at the story’s conclusion.
- The character is often a fish out of water. Most humans have felt out of place at some point in their lives, so putting the protagonist in an environment where he or she feels out of place creates empathy almost immediately. This characteristic is often used as a staple in comedy to create laughs where the character must pretend to fit in, and slowly but surely, the pretext unravels.
- The character the play begins and ends with. The protagonist does not always have to appear on page one of the play, but that character should appear fairly soon and be on stage a lot. If we as an audience are to identify with that character, they need to present for us on stage as our surrogate. Often, of course, the protagonist’s name is in the title of the play.
- The character who must deal with conflicts in the pursuit of his/her goal. Having to deal with conflicts is a key defining characteristic of a good protagonist. As the hero/heroine pursues the goal, he or she will run into complications. How the character deals with these complications creates suspense and tells us something about the world of the play.
- A protagonist is usually a human, but does not have to be. Animal protagonists are more common in movies or novels, such as *Finding Nemo* or *Watership Down*. There is no reason that a protagonist cannot be an animal or even an inanimate object. The musical *The Lion King*, for example, features the lion Simba as its protagonist. *Cats*, for instance has a full cast of animals (though whether a protagonist is clearly identified in that musical is another question). The musical *Starlight Express* features a cast of anthropomorphized toy trains which are racing against each other in the mind of a small boy who serves as an off-stage narrator.



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Problems that Occur in Developing a Protagonist

There are some key mistakes playwrights frequently make with the protagonist or issues that prevent the protagonist from being as powerful as the playwright might want. The table below lists the issues with some simple suggestions.

Issue	Remedy
There is no clear protagonist.	The playwright decides on which character will serve as the audience’s “stand in”, probably the character who has the most at stake.
The protagonist has no clear goal.	The playwright must identify a goal for the protagonist. The goal should answer the following question: What does the character want more than anything else in the world? It might also answer the question: What does the character think will restore his or her peace of mind? Presumably, the character really wants something and/or something has happened early in the play that has disturbed the character’s peace of mind. If so, we need to know what that is.
We don’t know what it will look like when the protagonist achieves the goal.	The playwright should identify what is sometimes called an on-stage manifestation. On stage, it is helpful to know what it will look like when the protagonist achieves the goal. It makes it crystal clear to the audience whether or not the character has achieved the goal. (More about goals and on-stage manifestations in the next podcast, by the way.)
The protagonist is one of the least interesting characters in the play.	<p>The protagonist is often the psychological stand in for the playwright him or herself. The secondary characters represent other aspects of the playwright’s personality. The protagonist then become divested of truly interesting personality facets.</p> <p>One thing to do is to make sure that the protagonist has the highest stakes in the play or is the most at risk.</p>

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	<p>Another option is to make sure that your protagonist is a full-bodied character, presumably with some flaws. Not only do these flaws make the protagonist more interesting, but the flaws also set up an arc for the character and give the character somewhere to go over the course of the play. Frequently the character needs to learn a lesson, and part of the story of the play is how the protagonist learns that lesson. Often, the character is “irritable, restless and discontented” at the top of the play and the play is about the character’s journey to peace of mind. If the character is too happy, too nice, or too perfect, the character is often vapid or boring.</p> <p>Finally, one tried and true way to develop your protagonist is to do full-on character work. There are lots of ways to build out a characters. This podcast won’t go into those ways. There are many resources that contain lists of questions that writers can ask about their characters to build out a more fully developed protagonist. The fact is, that the more fully you understand the world of your protagonist, the more powerful he/she will be in the play. Facts such as “where does he live?” or “what is his job” reveal a lot about a character and help define him/her and bring the protagonist to life.</p>
<p>The protagonist is never in true danger or at risk.</p>	<p>This problem is psychologically related to the problem above. When the playwright identifies strongly with his/her protagonist, the playwright is often protective of the character, and so refuses to put the character in danger. The fact is that the more danger the protagonist is in, the more real the threat and the more exciting the play. Do not be afraid to put your character in danger.</p> <p>In classical structure, close to the end of the play, the worst thing that could possibly happen</p>

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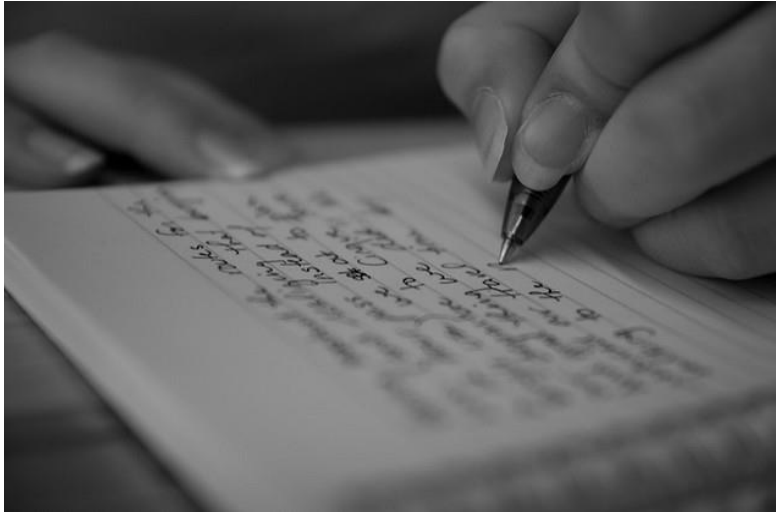
	<p>to the character happens. The character faces his worst fear. One pitfall of many plays is that the character doesn't face this moment of truth at the end of the play and run the risk of losing everything.</p>
<p>The protagonist does not make a strong decisive choice at the end of the play which resolves the crisis. Someone else solves the problem for the protagonist, circumstances conspire in some way to solve the problem, or a magical solution emerges.</p>	<p>Here, the story needs to be structured in a way that allows the protagonist to resolve the issue him/herself. If you have a play (or an outline for a play) and you realize that at the conclusion, another character (not the protagonist) steps in and helps the protagonist achieve his goal or “saves” the protagonist, you have <i>weakened</i> your protagonist. Fundamentally, resolving the problem this way disempowers your audience members by not allowing them to have the fun of seeing the character they identify with resolve his/her own issue.</p>



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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 the protagonist. (Try to pick a play where the protagonist is fairly easy to identify.) See how many of the following are true of your protagonist: It’s pretty clear who the protagonist is. The protagonist has a clear goal. The protagonist is the most interesting character. The protagonist is active; he/she makes things happen. At some point, the protagonist is in true danger or at risk. This character makes a decisive choice at the end of the story which resolves the protagonist’s problems.

2. Consider the play you are now working on or thinking about. Who do you think is the protagonist? What does that character want more than anything else in the world?

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3. Consider the play you are now working on or thinking about. Who do you think is the protagonist? What does that character want more than anything else in the world?

4. What are the protagonist’s flaws and what will be his psychological journey? How will he/she be endangered? What choices will he/she make that will drive action?

5. What decision will the protagonist make at the end of the story that resolves the question of whether or not the goal will be attained? How does that decision reveal theme?

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Your Assignments (Continued)

1. Take the ideas above and see if you can identify the central idea or value in the middle of it all. And then (of course), see if you can determine your point of view on that idea. What is it that you might want an audience member to reflect on as he/she exits the theater?



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