

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

with Andrew Black



Participant Notes

Podcast Five:

The Major Dramatic Question

“The Play’s The Thing.....”



The PSH Podcast Series: The Play’s the Thing

Introduction

Welcome

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

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Introduction (Continued)

Podcast Five Agenda

- Welcome/Start-Up’s
- The handout
- Who am I? (Your host, Andrew Black, playwright, and your sponsor, Play Submissions Helper)
- Why Create a Major Dramatic Question?
 - Engages the audience
 - Provides a “shape” to the story
 - Maps to questions the audience is probably struggling with
- Using the MDQ
 - Introduce early; wrap up near the end
 - Link to protagonist
- Kinds of Goals
 - Kinds of goals and kinds of plots
 - Positive vs. negative goals
 - Strength of goal
- On-Stage Manifestation
 - Conceptual goals and on-stage manifestations
 - How the two kinds of goals work together
- Possible Outcomes of the MDQ
- MDQ and Plot
 - The nature of the MDQ can help drive plotting
 - Once the MDQ is answered, the play is effectively over.

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The Major Dramatic Question: Why Does There Need to Be One?



The audience is typically engaged in the play when the playwright creates dramatic questions that the audience struggles to answer along with the hero/heroine. People are drawn to questions. Questions engage the human mind. It is not a coincidence that one of the most common kinds of stories that enjoyed by audiences are mysteries (nor that Agatha Christie continues to be one of the most produced playwrights here in the United States).

Audience members expect a certain “shape” to a story when they go to the theater, and the Major Dramatic Question (MDQ) is largely responsible for providing that shape. The MDQ lets the audience members know when things have begun and what they are waiting for. To a certain extent, the MDQ lets the audience know when the play will be over and when they will get to go home. The answer is: they will get to go home when the MDQ has been answered.

Philosophically, the underlying MDQ of an effective narrative is almost always: How will the protagonist find peace of mind? Something (usually the inciting incident) has disarranged the peace of mind of the hero, and that person is on a quest to restore balance and / or peace of mind. The overarching MDQ is: Will he or she be able to find balance?

One reason this filter is important is that almost everyone in the audience will be able to identify with that meta-question. It is, of course, one of the Questions of Life. How do I find peace of mind? And, if you, as a playwright, structure your story so that your leading character

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is fundamentally looking for peace of mind, you will have a question will automatically engage the audience.

Using the MDQ

The MDQ is a question that should be introduced early in the play and should resolved shortly before the play’s conclusion.

An effective MDQ begins with the protagonist’s name. The question is one that pre-occupies the individual in the play with whom the audience member will be identifying. To wit: Will the protagonist (the hero/heroine, the person I as an audience member am identifying with) get.....whatever it is?

So. A strong protagonist needs something to achieve peace of mind. That thing the protagonist needs becomes the protagonist’s goal. And by extension, the major dramatic question of the narrative becomes: Will the protagonist achieve that goal (which is intended to restore balance and provide peace of mind)?

Kinds of Goals

Christopher Booker’s wonderful book “The Seven Basic Plots” outlines seven different kinds of basic plots that reappear over and over in stories of all kinds. If you are struggling to determine what, exactly, your protagonist needs to achieve peace of mind, you can consider the meta-questions driven by Booker’s various plots. (I am providing six questions that could serve as a meta-frame for an individual play.)

- Will the protagonist be able to overcome the monster?
- Will the protagonist discover his/her own inner brilliance?
- Will the protagonist find what he/she is searching for?
- Will the protagonist be able to return home?
- Will the protagonist be able to “break the spell” which has fallen over the land/kingdom and return thing to their “natural order”?
- Will the protagonist be able to give into a dark temptation without falling prey to the dangers associated with the choice?

It is likely whatever premise you are working with can be structured so that you are focusing on one key individual who is struggling with one of the questions listed above.

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Note also that the MDQ needs to be structured so that it can be answered in one of three ways: Yes, no and we will never know. If the MDQ is structured as a binary, it helps make it clear to the audience when it has been answered and what the answer is.

In general, the protagonists’ should be positive. The hero should be pursuing something, or trying to make something happen, or to get something. Positive goals are active. The hero can do things to achieve the goal. Keeping something from happening (a negative goal) is generally harder to activate.

In general, it is wise to see if you can structure the play so that the protagonist has a positive goal; it will be much easier for the audience to invest emotionally in someone who wants something, as opposed to someone who is trying to keep something at bay or simply to maintain the status quo. Particularly if you are new to playwriting or still mastering the craft....try to create a positive goal.

One last note: The more strongly the hero wants to achieve his/her goal, the more compelling the story will be. That’s all there is to it. If the hero’s life depends upon getting the goal, so much the better. There needs to be a lot at stake for the hero, and preferably, the protagonist wants to achieve his goal more than anybody else in the story wants to achieve theirs.

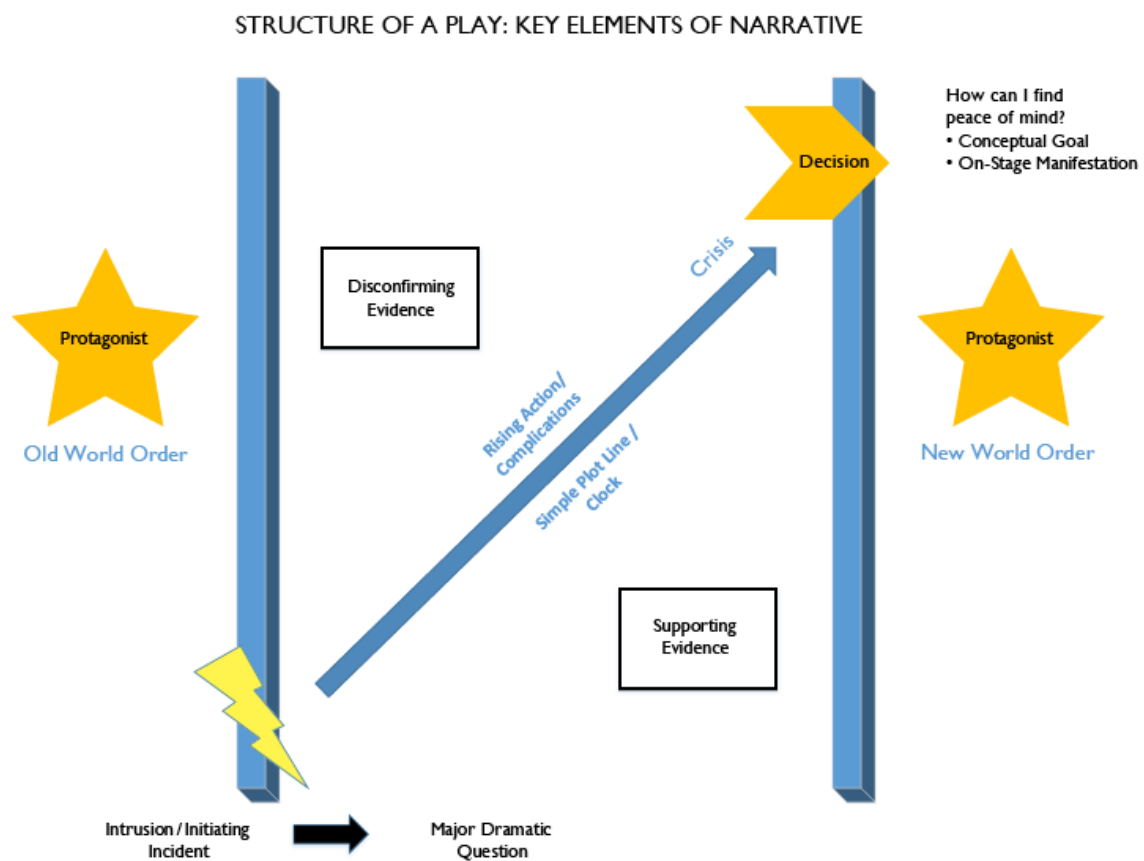


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The On-Stage Manifestation

Once the goal which is the basis of the MDQ has been identified, the playwright needs to help the audience members understand how they will know whether or not the protagonist has achieved the goal. We already know that the protagonist wants peace of mind, and that he/she has a goal which that character believes will help him/her achieve that peace of mind. So at this point, I sub-divide the goal into two kinds of goals.

You may wish to refer to the following graphic.



In the upper right hand corner, you see the question: *How can I find peace of mind?* That question frames everything else. Under that are two bullet points, “Conceptual Goal” and “On-Stage Manifestation”. Assuming the protagonist has a goal, the audience needs to know how that goal will be realized, and the more specifically the goal is spelled out, the easier it is for the audience to tell what is going on. This tangible representation of the goal achieved is called the on-stage manifestation.

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When you as a playwright know what your protagonist wants, you will likely choose an on-stage manifestation (Will Ted find the lost knife?) or a conceptual goal (Will Ted fall in love?). Your play will be stronger if you are able to tie an on-stage manifestation to the conceptual goal. For example, the knife represents Ted’s manhood, which is what he really wants to recover—and by finding the knife and his manhood, he will have peace of mind. Here, the conceptual goal follows the on-stage manifestation. Or, we will know Ted has fallen in love—and achieved peace of mind—if he kisses the pretty redhead on the forehead at the office holiday party. Here, the on-stage manifestation follows the conceptual goal.

It would be hard to overemphasize the importance of understanding this flow of associations. The hero wants peace of mind; that is a given. And he/she believes that something will give it to him/her. It may be an intangible quality (love, respect, being famous) that will do it. If so, it would be a great idea to put that quality in some specific measurable terms. Asking the question: what would it look like on stage if my hero were to achieve that thing he is looking for? In fact, it is useful if Ted says at the beginning of the play....I really want to fall in love with Brenda, and I will know that we are in love if she lets me kiss her at the office holiday party. It is still better if he repeats it two more times over the course of the play. When the audience hears Ted say this same thing 3 times, they will know for sure what they are waiting for. As a playwright, you have actually created a lot of suspense in your play: the suspense of waiting to see whether Ted will kiss Brenda at the office holiday party.

Again, it may be that a specific thing will provide the protagonist with peace of mind (finding a knife, winning a contest, solving a crime, opening a clinic) and if so, it would be a great idea to attach that specific goal to some conceptual idea. For instance, Ted wants to find a knife that he used to kill a wolf when he was a much younger man. If he can find that knife, it will represent to him his lost manhood. And, in fact, if Ted says several times (three is the magic number) over the course of the play, “If I could only find that old hunting knife, it would be like having my lost power restored to me,” then the audience is connected with Ted, the search and is waiting to see whether Ted finds the knife or not.

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Possible Outcomes of the MDQ

The beauty of having both a conceptual goal (other than peace of mind) and an on-stage manifestation is that this configuration allows the playwright to delight and surprise the audience with various configurations.

Having both a conceptual goal and an on-stage manifestation to work with allows the playwright a variety of ways to surprise the audience and make a point about the human condition. The protagonist may achieve the goal and get peace of mind. This conclusion would be considered a simple happy ending. The protagonist may not achieve his/her goal and get peace of mind another way. The protagonist may achieve his/her goal and then discover (surprise!) that achieving the goal did not provide peace of mind. Finally, the protagonist may not achieve his goal and learn that he/she was right; that thing he / she wanted really was what he / she needed. Specific examples can be provided which will help make these various possible permutations clearer.

MDQ and Plot

A note about MDQ and plot: Frequently the goal is an activity that will require a series of steps to achieve. If Ted’s goal is to find a missing knife (on-stage manifestation) to recover his lost manhood (conceptual goal), there are a series of steps he might have to go through. First, he might look for the knife. Then he might try to recall where he was the last time he had the knife and go there and see what happens. He might call someone who saw him with the knife and ask that person if he/she knows where it is. He might use self-hypnosis to try to trick himself into recalling where the knife is. Each of the “steps” that are part of the process for achieving the goal can help anchor a plot.

And one additional note: do not make the mistake of answering the question too soon. Once the audience feels that they got what they were waiting for, they will be ready to go home. (Similarly, the amount of text that follows the answering of the question needs to be limited.)

Before we get to plotting, however, the next concept to look at is “old” and “new world order”. And your assignments for MDQ are on the next page.



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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 major dramatic question. (Try to pick a play where this question would be fairly easy to identify.) See how many of the following are true of the MDQ in this play: It is introduced early in the story. It is answered near the end of the story. The MDQ involves the protagonist and something he/she wants badly. The MDQ relates to the protagonist’s ability to have peace of mind. The MDQ is structured so that it can be answered: Yes, no, we will never know. There is an on-stage manifestation. I know how the MDQ will be answered.

2. Consider the play you are now working on or thinking about. What is the major dramatic question? What does the protagonist want more than anything else in the world?

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3. For the play you are working on: How will we as audience members know whether the protagonist has achieved this goal or not? What does the goal mean or represent to the protagonist?

4. For the play you are working on: What will the answer to the MDQ be? Will the protagonist achieve his/her goal? Will the achievement of that goal bring him/her peace of mind?

5. 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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