

Title:

The "Casablanca" Secret

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1024

Summary:

Good writing is often designed around a character who has a distorted vision of himself or of the world. During the story, he is placed under sufficient pressure to force an epiphany, a moment of clarity in which, he sees the world as it is, not as he wished it to be.

A classic example is "Casablanca," where Bogart's immortal Rick has managed to create an insular world in which he can pretend to be utterly detached and uninvolved. He supposedly has no political beliefs, an...

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Article Body:

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A classic example is "Casablanca," where Bogart's immortal Rick has managed to create an insular world in which he can pretend to be utterly detached and uninvolved. He supposedly has no political beliefs, and no real human connections. But the reappearance of Ilsa forces a cascade of events that cause Rick to reexamine his attitudes about love, fate, patriotism, courage, fidelity, friendship, and life itself.

Rick begins as a damaged, closed off character, carrying wounds to his heart and ego. What he WANTS is to be left alone to his self-pity. What he NEEDS is to be re-awakened to a life of purpose. The writers, wisely, give Rick what he needs, not what he wants, and in that manner a classic was born.

In Lifewriting™ we trust that the quality of a writer's skill will be heightened by his evolution as a human being—in other words, his ability to write people will be based on his capacity for honest observation of himself and others. His ability to turn a plot creatively will be based on his understanding of the

world as it is—not as we often fantasize it to be. This ability to create moments of suspense, revelation, humor and horror often triggers an “ah! Life is just like that!” response from the audience, a recognition of universal humanity that can transcend culture and time.

The easiest way to learn this is to look at our own lives. None of us make it through our years without wounds, damage, pain. Just as physical scar tissue shortens muscles and limits mobility, emotional scar tissue creates “armoring” around our hearts. It also begins to warp our reality, as we create justifications for why THIS relationship self-destructed, or THAT job crashed and burned...once again. It’s never our fault, of course. The opposite, and even more damaging reaction is to take not just responsibility for our failures, but massive guilt as well. Our lives don’t work (so the reasoning goes) because we are bad, terrible, horrible people undeserving of healthy bodies or relationships or careers.

Either attitude clouds our vision, makes it difficult to see the world as it is. Those clouded inner eyes and warped “reality maps” make it very difficult to navigate a path to our chosen goals. Again and again we will bark our shins on invisible rocks, crashing into invisible walls, almost as if life is trying to teach us, to educate us, to enlighten us as to the realities of existence.

What we WANT is the comforting womb of our illusions. What we NEED is to be born into the world as it actually is.

Often, we are dragged kicking and screaming into clarity, forced ultimately to accept the ways we’ve been wrong. “Too soon old, too late smart” is one rather fatalistic way of speaking of this process. Too often, we must be old before we grasp that WE are the ones who sabotaged our dreams of success. We are the ones who refused to exercise and eat reasonably—that our bodies are more the result of our behaviors than our genetics. We are the ones who broke communication in our relationships, who lied and withheld and blamed, and thought that “the other person” was responsible for our misery. We are the ones who refused to grow up, to stop blaming our parents, or society, or racism, ageism, sexism or any other “ism” for our lack of happiness.

Too late, we are battered by one failure or disappointment after another, until the ego walls we created to protect our self-image are shattered, and we’re forced into contact with our true selves. The moment of death is supposed to be absolutely first rate at creating such clarity, a realization of our true values, and regret at the way we sold out our true potential.

But there are events that create clarity. The birth of a first child. A near-

death experience. Accomplishing some worthy and transforming goal. The first deep and true moment of love or friendship. Transformation. In such moments, we see ourselves for the magnificent, wounded, earthy, spiritual beings that we are. We forgive ourselves, and our families, and the world around us, knowing that we have no right to expect more perfection from others than we ourselves possess. And as the saying goes, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." No perfect people in this world. Accept it. And move on.

Stories that deal with these core stressors--life, death, birth, transformation, love--are always, and have always been the most popular stories in human history. Under this stress, your character, robbed of their self-justifying lies, must speak the truth. Under these stressors, they are revealed in their magnificence...or sometimes (especially if they refuse to acknowledge reality) revealed in their venality, cowardice, and dishonesty.

This is one of the functions of story. The writer must create story pressures beyond the capacity of the characters to maintain their illusions. Then, and only then, can you reveal their true natures. To do this, just look at the times in your own life that you awakened, transformed, grew, went kicking and screaming into the next level of your life. Then create dramatic exaggerations or simplifications of these passages, and create characters to experience them. Let them be as human--as flawed and magnificent--as you yourself are. As we all are. Heighten their qualities for the sake of drama, to be sure, but always, always, at their core, let them be human, whatever it is that you believe human beings to be.

Let them struggle. Let them learn. Let them love.

Let them live.

Do this, and it will mark the beginning of a beautiful friendship...between you, your muse, and a world audience starved for entertaining truth.