

Lifewriting Workshop Week #4: The Road of Trials

Welcome back! Here we are in week #4, and I hope you've done all your homework. The "Road of Trials" is just the cycles of cause and effect, action and reaction, the journeys and struggles and travails of your lead character (or group of characters)

And for you, as a writer, it is the daily ritual of action and emotion, as well as the overall arc of progress toward creating and sustaining a career.

To this end, again, Tananarive and I created the concept of what I call a "machine" and she refers to as a "garden"--what must be created, seeded and maintained daily. Which, if every day you do what must be done, you will maximize your chance of reaching your goals. As they say...nothing can guarantee success in life. But inaction or wrong action can guarantee failure.

So the "machine" or "garden" for writing might resemble the following pattern:

1. Write a thousand words a day.
2. Read ten thousand words a day
3. Finish a story a week, or every other week
4. Put them in the mail
5. Keep them in the mail
6. Don't re-write except to editorial request.

This "road" of action will probably result in consistent sales in about two years. About the time it takes to get an AA degree. Seems fair to me!

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To understand the Hero's Journey pattern a bit more deeply, let's take a look at last week's homework, CASABLANCA.

Again--this is art, not math. There will be other valid ways of looking at this classic film.

HERO CONFRONTED WITH CHALLENGE: Rick must move beyond his heartbreak and come to back to life as a hero.

REJECTS THE CHALLENGE: He has rejected the challenge since Paris. Everything in his life is a denial of the responsibility to engage with life and be "real." He has no real friendships or love. Is politically neutral. Drinks too much, smokes too much, and tries to pretend he cares about nothing.

ACCEPTS THE CHALLENGE: He is forced to deal with his past, and its agony, when Ilsa comes to Casablanca with her husband, famed freedom fighter Victor Laslo.

ROAD OF TRIALS: virtually every incident in Casablanca either explores the world, establishes character. Beautiful efficiency! Rick interacts with Ugate (Peter Lorre) establishing his admiration for someone who murders German soldiers. He even risks his life to protect Ugate's "Letters of Transit" (contrast with his claim that "I stick my neck out for

no one.”) Once Ilsa shows up, every move and counter-move is designed to get her back, or at least discover why she “abandoned” him.

ALLIES AND POWERS: All the people who show him different aspects of his own life and personality. Ugate, Inspector Renoit (wonderful!), Ilsa (who shows him his heart), Laslo (who shows him his courage), etc. His powers are courage, intelligence, the capacity to bond people to him, moral clarity (why he hates himself--he knows he has betrayed himself)

ENCOUNTER EVIL--DEFEATED: At the very point when it seems he might get Ilsa back, and understands how and why their separation happens, he learns that Laslo has been arrested.

DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL: What does he do? Flee with Ilsa and have love without honor? Who is he, really?

LEAP OF FAITH: The faith is that if he does the right thing, it will be the best thing. He will always have Ilsa’s love, and that will make even dying in a concentration camp worth while.

CONFRONT EVIL--SUCCEED: “Round up the usual suspects.” One of the greatest lines in film history. Inspector Renoit, inspired by Rick’s patriotic act, finds his own courage. Marvelous.

THE STUDENT BECOMES THE TEACHER: He teaches Ilsa what love really is, Renoit how to be a hero, and by extension, the audience itself the critical importance of clear values in life. Wonderful.

Does this match your own conclusions? Yes? No? Why or why not?

This week, let’s try a genre film, the terrific 28 DAYS LATER. Wow. What a tense, powerful film!

See you next week!

Write With Passion!
Steve and Tananarive