

Week #7: The Dark Night of The Soul

Greetings. If you are like most students in most courses, you have set goals for yourself in this course, and found yourself unable to make all of them stick. IF your self-image does not welcome change, then you will use these setbacks as “evidence” that you cannot have your dreams, that it is pointless and useless, and the emotions become a revolving funhouse of mirrors, feeding insecurity which generates negative results, which feeds your belief that you can’t do it, which...

And on and on it goes. And the very worst part of the cycle is the moment when you feel, and think, that all of your innate capacities are insufficient to meet the task at hand. The “Dark Night of the Soul.”

You can find smaller versions of this in individual scenes (Dustin Hoffman fails to make French toast in “Kramer vs. Kramer”. Sequences (Karen Allen is blown up in “Raiders of the Lost Ark” [or is she...?]), Acts (Obi-Wan killed in Star Wars) and overall films (In Die Hard Bruce Willis asks his cop radio-friend to tell his wife he loves her, that he died trying to save her.) Even in the most trivial adventure film, there is such an emotional moment. Don’t miss yours.

In your writing, it is the deepest pit of despair. In the PROCESS of writing, it might be the point when it feels the entire project is turning into puree of mud. And in your life, it can be the small moments when we abandon our diets, give up on relationships, finally look at our bank balance, or lose the big deal.

Let’s look at the Hero’s Journey pattern in last week’s homework, 12 YEARS A SLAVE:

CONFRONTED WITH CHALLENGE. Overall, Solomon Northrup is challenged to maintain hope and humanity and regain freedom after being kidnapped into slavery.

REJECTS CHALLENGE. Initially, he is in shock and disbelief that this is happening to him, and is acting as if he will “wake up” from what is obviously a nightmare fantasy.

ACCEPTS CHALLENGE: About the time he reaches William Ford’s plantation, he begins to think of how he can use his skills to survive, escape, and find allies.

ROAD OF TRIALS. Being kidnapped, sold, his name changed, moved from plantation to plantation, meeting people, seeking perspective, taking action after action to no apparent avail.

ALLIES AND POWERS. Patsey, his first owner, Ford (not a total bastard, just a weakling), Bass (Brad Pitt) a Canadian carpenter. His memories of his wife and children empower him as well. Powers—he is very smart, strong, clever, eloquent, perceptive, with musical and engineering skills.

CONFRONT EVIL—DEFEATED. His letter to his family is destroyed, and he is betrayed by a man who had promised to help him. A slave dies of old age and heat stroke in the field.

DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL. Northrup begins to believe that it might be impossible for him to escape this horrid situation.

LEAP OF FAITH. He finally joins with the other slaves in singing a hymn. (Can't get more literal than that!) This step toward spirituality and fellowship with his fellow enslaved (from whom he has usually kept a distance) is bittersweet, both a literal leap of faith--AND a visual acceptance of his lot.

CONFRONT EVIL—SUCCEED. His faith in humanity is rewarded. After some coaxing, he trusts a Canadian builder, Bass, with his story. Bass actually carried his letter North, and found a friend willing to travel south and testify that he is NOT a runaway slave, but a free man.

THE STUDENT BECOMES THE TEACHER. His book is published. His story became, arguably, the first serious American theatrical film to actually deal with and depict the institution of slavery from the perspective of slaves.

Again, I invite you to devise your own pattern. This is art, not math. But once you begin to see the structure, you will never forget it. Once you begin to apply it to your own projects and life, it will become a part of you!

This week, let's look at something a bit lighter, shall we? How about JERRY MAGUIRE? (Pay particular attention to screenwriter Cameron Crowe's skillful characterization and dialogue.)

Write with Passion!

Tananarive and Steve