

THE JAGGED EDGE OF STORY
CHANCE, FREE WILL, & NECESSITY

LMG Swain

My Credentials

Professional Membership:

Oklahoma Writers Federation, Inc.

Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators

Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America

Horror Writers Association

Oklahoma Book Awards—Judge Young Adult &

Children's category



Education:

BA English, Oklahoma Baptist University

30+ hours Masters in Creative Writing—University
of Central University, Oklahoma City University,

University of Oklahoma

40 Years Public School teaching



Publications:

Hardy Boys CaseFiles; Nancy Drew/Hardy Boys
SuperMysteries

Creator/Writer Universal Monsters Series from
Scholastic and Universal Studios

RollerCoaster Tycoon #4: Kidnapped!

Creator Map Monsters (British)

PRESENT PROJECT



The first rite-of-passage into adulthood for many of today's American teens is passing a state exam to receive a driver's license. In my futuristic novel *Popinjay*, all children are born without gender. At 16, a teen's rite-of-passage into adulthood is passing State exams to receive True Gender—True Male or True Female.

Writers are Problem Solvers





DOES A WRITER START WITH A SOLUTION IN
SEARCH OF A PROBLEM?

NO
PROBLEM

NO
STORY

NO MATTER
HOW CLEVER
THE SOLUTION





THEREFORE,
WRITERS ARE THE
ULTIMATE
PROBLEM MAKERS

Herman Melville

Billy Budd, Sailor



“Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its jagged edges.”

Billy Budd, the Sailor

Herman Melville

In construction of a tale, think in terms of the natural structure of the Problem of the tale.



It's the nature of the cat to kill the mouse even when the cat isn't hungry

Think in terms of natural structure of the problem

1. The Action that created problem — Catalyst Action

Think in terms of natural structure of the problem

The Wizard of Oz

What Inciting Action created the problem that resulted in the incidents that followed in this story?

Think in terms of natural structure of the problem



Miss Gulch
taking Toto?

Think in terms of natural structure of the problem

Toto escaping Miss Gulch?



Think in terms of natural structure of the problem

Dorothy & Toto
running away then
getting caught in
the cyclone?



Think in terms of natural structure of the problem

Killing the Witch of the East?



Think in terms of natural structure of the problem

Dorothy given the shoes that didn't belong to her, angering the Witch of the West, who is the rightful heir?



Think in terms of natural structure of the problem

The Answer (get ready)



Think in terms of natural structure of the problem

CONFRONTATION BETWEEN

MISS GULCH AND TOTO

WHEN TOTO IS CAUGHT ONCE AGAIN

DIGGING IN MISS GULCH'S GARDEN



(UNSEEN BY
THE AUDIENCE)



Think in terms of natural structure of the problem

2. The Threat—Who/What created the Problem (which lead to the Inciting Action)?

Mini Quiz 01: What is the more popular, yet ambiguous and cryptic name given to the Threat?



Natural structure of the problem

Without the Threat, the main character has nothing to do.

The writer has no story



Natural structure of the problem

Without the brilliant
insane psychologist
Hannibal Lecter,
Clarisse Starling is
just another FBI
agent

Natural structure of the problem



Without the Joker, Gotham would be a rather mundane metropolis, and Bruce Wayne would just be a fancy-man running around in gray tights, cape, and cowl with a colorfully—dressed young ward.

Natural structure of the problem



Without Darth Vader, Luke would be a randy farm boy.

Leia would be a Harlequin princess waiting for her bad-boy prince charming.



Natural structure of the problem

“I’m both
ya’ll’s
DADDY!”





Natural structure of the problem

The Threat introduces the Complication, the Conflict, the Chaos into the otherwise somewhat dull daily routine.

Natural structure of the problem

The Threat is external or internal & sometimes both.

The Threat is often the enemy with out, but not always!

The most intriguing Threat is often the friend and/or the lover with in.

The Threat may be one's own tragically flawed character.





Natural structure of the problem

3. Resolving Action—the Action that resolves the problem.

Natural structure of the problem

A good tale has several smaller complications with several smaller Resolving Actions before (& sometimes after) the major Resolving Action.



Natural structure of the problem

At each step, each turn, each decision, the actions of the main character* resolves one or more of the inciting actions, especially the major inciting action that will culminate in the final resolution.

*Mini Quiz 02
We have a special name of the Main Character, but you problem know the Main Character as the who?



Natural structure of the problem

As with truths, sincere, honest resolutions are untidy, uneven, and inconvenient—jagged.

If your tale has a “pretty” resolution, you have a sermon.



Think in terms of natural structure of the problem



If you feel more comfortable calling this character the Protagonist, then okay.

4. Anti-threat—
driving force of the
Principle Action—
that action which
stops the Threat's
Inciting Action

Natural structure of the problem

Merely referring to the Anti-Threat as the “protagonist” veils the one essential character element that drives the story—stopping the Threat.



NATURAL STRUCTURE OF THE PROBLEM



The Threat
is the
reason for
the story,
not the
Anti-Threat.

Natural structure of the problem



The Anti-Threat woke up that day expecting to go about his/her normal routine—not to fight dragons, dodge bullets, avoid zombies, have his gumdrop buttons pulled off, be attacked by rabid wombats, rid his swamp of annoying fairy-tale creatures, or end up in any number of life-or-death scenarios.



Resistance of the Threat

The Threat caused the Problem.

The Threat resists at all costs and at every opportunity the Anti-threat's attempts to resolve the Problem.

The Threat has a problem with the Anti-Threat, not the other way around.

Begin with the Threat

The story is about Threat's problem with Anti-Threat!

This may be unseen events before the story begins, as in the confrontation between Miss Gulch and Toto—

or Iago's violent jealousy of Othello



Initially, the Anti-Threat is not aware he/she is about to get the kibosh from the Threat, whether a crabby spinster or a jealous subordinate.

Complications

—events set up by the Threat that resists the attempts of the Anti-threat to easily resolve the problem, which leads to—



Crisis

—an event that defines the Anti-Threat's character and forces the Anti-Threat into



Climatic Action

—that then forces
the Anti-threat
into





Crisis

—in which the Anti-Threat is forced by fate or sheer will to

the only Resolution left to him/her

—a resolution made possible only because of the choices made by both the Threat and the Anti-Threat



Chance

What first happens to the Character in the story is Chance--waking up every day, stretching, showering, shaving, toilet, eating, and going about normal routine to get ready for what the day may bring.



Chance

Of course, Character knows what's going to happen because he/she has done the *same thing* every day for the last umpteen years.



Chance leads to Change leads to Chance leads to ...

The paradox here is that Chance leading to Change is the result of previous actions of the Character, either seen and known by the Reader.

Better, perhaps unknown and unseen by the Reader-- either way: doesn't matter.





Chance

In *Fargo*, we're not fully aware of Jerry Lundegaard's embezzlement of his father-in-law's car dealership *before* he hatches the plan to have his wife kidnaped and held for ransom.

We just know Jerry needs hundreds of thousands of dollars for some unknown reason.

Chance

Wherever and whenever you begin the Character in his tale, he sets in motion a seemingly ordinary series of events that somewhere in the day are forced aside by an extraordinary event (and perhaps some minor extraordinary events) that slaps the Character out of his comfort zone.



CHANCE

This comfort-zone-slapping extraordinary event is guided by the Threat.



Fargo

Jerry Lundegaard meets with the kidnapppers in Fargo, SD, to work out the details of their kidnappping his wife. The ransom? \$80,000, which they (Jerry and the kidnapppers) will split 50/50.





Lundegaard returns home to Minneapolis, walking through the door with a sack of groceries—the assumption is earlier that day his wife asked him to stop by the store before he came home—a very ordinary, Chance event. His father-in-law (from whom he has embezzled hundreds of thousands of dollars) has, by Chance, stopped by for dinner.

Free Will & Necessity

Free Will & Necessity of another person (foil, but often the Threat), perhaps who at first is unknown and unseen as well, plays the most important role in this slapping.



This is the Threat, which may be known or unknown not only to your character but to your reader as well.



Free Will & Necessity

In *Fargo*, Lundegaard invites the Threat (the kidnappers) to aid in his scheme, and the Threat has ideas of his own.

Using his own Free Will & Necessity, this Threat throws complications in Lundegaard's way, tripping up the embezzler, who must take on the role of Anti-Threat to stop the Inciting Action that he himself set in motion.



Fargo—Free Will & Necessity

Even loveable, affable, determined, and nine-months pregnant Chief-of-Police Marge Gunderson takes on the role of Threat to Lundegaard's Anti-Threat.

Don't think in terms of "good" and "bad". Think in terms of Threat and Anti-Threat.



Free Will & Necessity

The Gift—excellent example of a forgotten Threat (therefore unknown to both Protagonist and audience) who comes roaring out of hell from the protagonist's past to destroy his life.





Free Will & Necessity

A man has come from the distant past to visit an old high school classmate.

Our main character has nearly totally forgotten this “old high school classmate.”

Free Will & Necessity



Also forgotten is what our main character had done to this “old high school classmate” in high school.

All we know is this dude is a bit creepy, but he’s brought the couple a cool gift (while trying to hit on the main character’s wife).

Nearly too late, the creepy dude is revealed as the Threat, and the main character must morph into the Anti-Threat if his wife and he are to survive.

Then we learn the true meaning of *The Gift* and the Inciting Event that happened way back in high school that sat all the events of the story into motion.

None of this—how these two knew each other and the Inciting Event—are revealed to the audience until we are 3/4 through the film.



Wizard of Oz

Main plot

Dorothy getting home:

- Dorothy is stopped by both the Wizard and Glenda
- each requires Dorothy to first fulfill a task
- Wizard and Glenda the “Good” witch each can send Dorothy home at any time each desires.

Wizard of Oz

Main plot

The Wizard and Glenda are Threats, not just the Wicked Witch of the West.





Wizard of Oz

Subplot

Confrontation with the Wicked Witch of the West, who only wants what is rightfully hers--the silver shoes that had belonged to the WWW's sister, whom Dorothy has accidentally killed.

Wizard of Oz

Sub Subplots—complications put upon Dorothy by Chance, Free-Will, and Necessity (and by default the Wizard and the “good witch” Glenda) in contact with three foils

Scarecrow--Enlightenment

Tin Man--Compassion

Lion—Competence



Wizard of Oz



Plus, Dorothy is given a task by the Wizard—to help her three friends and to help Dorothy to get home she must steal the witch's broom--Power

Wizard of Oz



Dorothy is tasked with helping her three new friends to resolve their issues, not just her own—so-called minor complications.

She accomplishes this when she defeats the Wicked Witch and takes the witch's broom to give to the Wizard . . .

Wizard of Oz

. . . a further Complication purposely added to thwart Dorothy's (Anti-Threat) stated goal, objective: "I just want to go home", even though she has had the ability and power to send herself home at any time—



Wizard of Oz

AND this bit of information is given to her by the one person who possessed this knowledge the entire journey--Glenda, the “Good Witch” of the North.



Dorothy vs Wicked Witch
Anti-Threat Threat

Scarecrow/Lion/Tin Man

- Meeting of 2 or more characters fighting for survival and forced by a seemingly “good” Threat (Glenda)
- Objective—2 opposing ambitions, each with an intended goal of receiving what is rightfully hers—Dorothy (Home) vs Wicked Witch (Shoes)

Wizard of Oz



Dorothy

vs

Wicked Witch

Anti-Threat

Threat

Scarecrow/Lion/Tin Man

- Encounter—One wins; one loses
- By going home, Dorothy may not see her friends again
- Plus, she was lied to and deceived by those claiming to help her,
- *AND . . .*

Wizard of Oz

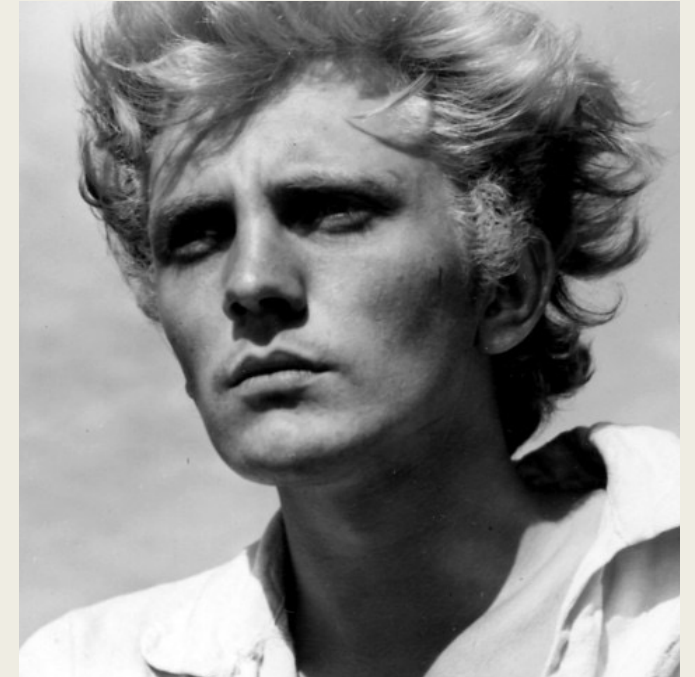


. . . it was
all just a
dream!

A rather jagged edge to a fascinating story

“Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its jagged edges.”

Billy Budd is described
as an Angel by the crew



The Angel must hang to bring
a sense of peace & normalcy
back to the ship.

In Melville's last novella,
Billy Budd, the Sailor,

Envy and Malice are offended by
Threat – John Claggart
the Beauty of Innocence.
Anti-Threat – Billy Budd

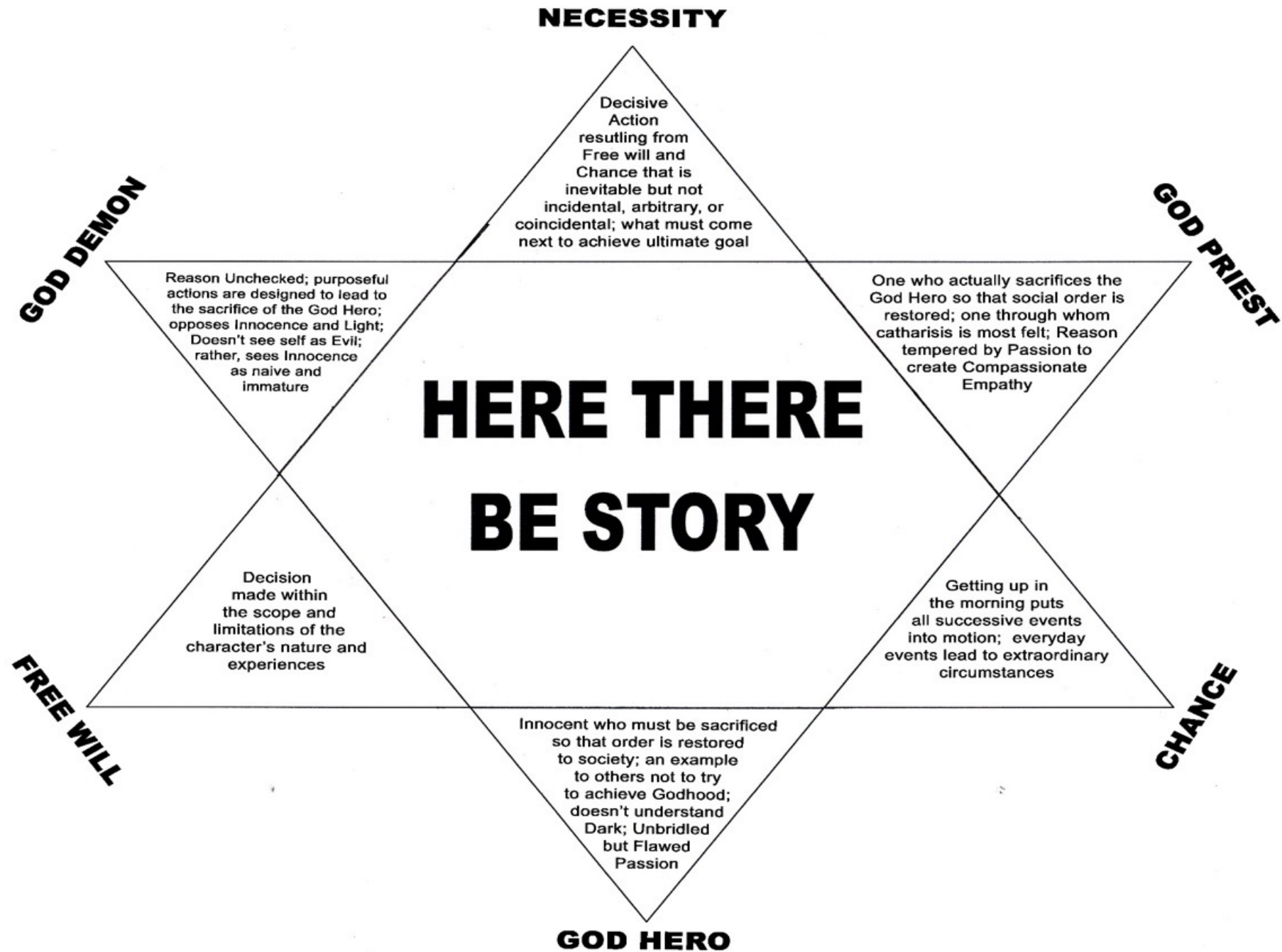
Or is the Angelic Billy
Budd, Beauty of
Innocence, the
THREAT to
Claggart's Envy and
Malice, the
Anti—Threat?



May the Threat be with You!



The End



“The Jagged Edge of Story” Word & Ppt.

The Word doc is an extensive look at this concept of story telling. If you'll email me your desire to have these files for your personal use, I'll get them to you. In “Subject” field, simply type OWFI Writers Workshop—I'll understand.

Mike@LMGSwain.com

Without even having to do anything else, along with “The Jagged Edge of Story” extended Word document and the nifty, brief PowerPoint, I’ll include a copy of “The Hero’s Journey 12-Point Outline”

(based on Joseph Campbell’s thesis)

FREE!

