**The Whole Point**

What’s the Climax of a novel?

By Victoria Mixon

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We must understand, for now, only this one, fundamental thing: the Climax is the real reason we write our stories.

Once upon a time, two teenagers became so distraught over their passion for each other they committed suicide—that’s the premise. Cause? Their parents wouldn’t let them marry or even date—that’s the story. Cause of that? Their families hated each other—that’s the backstory.

—Romeo & Juliet, William Shakespeare

Once upon a time, a man succumbed to idiocy over the death of the woman he loved—that’s the premise. Cause? His rival for her love stole her from him and then killed her in anguish over the betrayal he’d committed against a saintly man—that’s the story. Cause of that? His rival was an old and close friend of his—that’s the backstory.

—The Idiot, Fyodor Dostoevsky

Once upon a time, a woman nearly lost the man she loved through her own machinations—that’s the premise. Cause? She was an inveterate social meddler—that’s the story. Cause of that? Although good-hearted, she had always been spoiled—that’s the backstory.

—Emma, Jane Austen

Once upon a time, a woman became so distraught over her adulterous affair that she committed suicide—that’s the premise. Cause? Society ostracized her for her affair, while at the same time her lover made her intensely jealous—that’s the story. Cause of that? She was a married female aristocrat of nineteenth-century Russia with an intensely passionate nature—that’s the backstory.

—Anna Karenina, Leo Tolstoy

Once upon a time, a man encountered a ghoul and disappeared—that’s the premise. Cause? He was out at night after spending the evening competing with another man for the love of a young woman—that’s the story. Cause of that? He was an unattractive schoolteacher in a highly superstitious time and place, with a ruthless and contemptuous rival—that’s the backstory.

—”The Legend Sleepy Hollow,” Washington Irving

Do you see how the Climax is, bizarrely enough, the premise? We must dwell on this in the depths of our soul until it makes total and complete sense. Mull it over. Meditate upon it. Make it a part of our writing identity. We cannot take this fact too seriously.

The Climax is the whole point. Otherwise, we have no reason for writing any of this.

Our story’s climax is the premise. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’d never heard the tip that they will (must) match laid out so clearly before. It’s seems too simple, too straightforward, doesn’t it?

So I tested this with some of my stories, going in the opposite direction as Victoria with her examples above. Sure enough, when I described the climax in one short sentence, I’d nailed the premise too.

What can we do with this knowledge? Plenty. As Victoria said, the climax is the whole point of the story. If we’re missing the point, the story will miss its mark.

If our climax doesn’t match our premise, we need to figure out why. Is our climax not bringing the right conflict to a head? Is our climax missing a critical piece because all the players aren’t in place? Has a subplot taken us off-course?

Or if we’re pantsing our way through a story and we’re not sure what the climax should look like, we can try to describe the premise in one sentence. That’s what the climax should center around.

From the other direction, we now have an easy way to boil down the premise of any story. Think of the climax and work from there.

So far, I haven’t encountered problems with the two aspects not matching, but by understanding this link, I can bring out my premise (which is often related to theme) to the fullest extent in my climax. No matter what, I know I’ll never look at climax and premise the same way again.

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