



RISING TO THE OCCASION: How a Story's Final Battle Gives it Meaning

by Sylvie Kurtz

Story theorists often use the word "battle" to describe the final clash between the main character and the main opponent. The word implies violence, a fight to the death. But battle can give your story so much more than physical fireworks.

The final confrontation can add meaning.

A big, violent battle does rev the pulse and assault the sense. It does create tension that can have the reader at the edge of his seat. But once the smoke clears, the special effects can leave the reader with not much more than that spike of adrenaline.

One way to look at the final confrontation is to imagine it as the point of a large funnel. Everything your main character endures, every decision he makes, every action he takes leads him to this one point in time--the do-or-die time. But rather than make this moment one of only clanking sabers, why not have both the inner and the outer arcs of the story meet there?

The outward and inward pressures percolate to their highest tension. The conflict rises to its tautest point. The theater narrows to its smallest space. It's man against himself, against his opponent, battling about the right way to live. The outcome of this meeting determines who wins and who loses the goal. But rather than emphasize physical strength, have it express what these two have been fighting for. Have it reveal your story's theme to the reader in a way that clearly shows him which idea or which value offers the proper way to live one's life.

The similarities and the differences between the main character and his main opponent are at their most apparent as they "battle"--whether that battle is one of words or weapons. The hero sees a reflection of his dark side, of what could happen to him should he fail to overcome his flaw. Will our hero fall into the trap of old patterns? Or will he pass this final test and earn his reward? The story hangs on that one moment.

By rising to the occasion, the main character shows his change, that he's overcome the flaw that limited his life at the beginning of the story. More importantly than gaining his outward goal, the main character achieves his inner need--the thing that caused a hole inside him because of his flaw. The experience, the forge of the "fire" of the final confrontation leaves him whole.

This deeper resonance will keep the story alive in your reader's mind long after he's read, "The End."