

Six Transitional Character Arc Steps

From Persona to Essence

Michael Hauge's Six Stage Plot Structure

The six transitional steps in the hero's character arc parallel the six stages of story development and occur at the same time. The hero at the start of the story is fully in his persona (or identity), and that's the face he shows the world. Because of his past wound and the lies he believes about himself and the world, he uses the persona to protect himself from hurt and pain. But as events in the story unfold, they force him to begin looking at his persona and challenging the protection it's given him.

When in persona, the character is never quite happy. He can't find peace or fulfillment—not truly—until he identifies, accepts, and embraces his true essence, who he really is.

These stages of development occur gradually over the course of the story, but there are six key moments that coincide with the key turning points in the plot.

Here is an example of a list of six scenes showcasing that transition from a novel brainstormed by Ed Markel at one of my Tahoe Plotting Madness boot camps. This is a great process to work on as you plot out your book, so that your scenes aren't just about moving the action forward but showing the incremental transition from persona to essence in your protagonist (which can also apply to other characters as well).

This requires you to develop a strong character background that supplies the motivation for his choices and actions as well as his fears. A past wound may be buried and forgotten, but until it is faced, it will exert power over a character's behavior and attitude.

First, ask yourself the question: "What can my character do at the end of your novel that he could not do at the beginning?" The answer will get to the heart of the transition.

The King of Hearts ~ Six Key Transitional Character Arc Scenes

Note where the placement of these six scenes are on Michael Hauge's chart.

In the beginning, Roy is the tough-guy type who doesn't care about anyone or anything. We learn that he was orphaned as a young boy when his mother was killed by Apaches, and his father dropped him off at a Spanish mission / orphanage and left him there. He grew up friendless and doesn't believe that love is real. **The lie** he has always told himself is **everyone who loves him either dies or runs away**, so there's really no such thing as love, and it wouldn't matter if there was.

1. Roy accidentally "frees" a group of people who live in a Spanish mission but what is actually a home for the insane. He doesn't know that they are "crazy," but they follow him and think he is their hero. When his confederates are all killed, Roy selfishly decides to use these people to help him achieve his new goal—to steal gold from the Union army. (He is fully in his persona at the start of the novel.)
2. Roy discovers one of these people, a young girl he calls "Deucie." seems to love him. She keeps giving him flowers (weeds, really) and acts like she worships him. Someone who he keeps rejecting doesn't leave him and continues showing him kindness. His heart fights against responding (glimpses his essence).
3. From Deucie, Roy learns not everyone who loves him dies or runs away. This challenges his most basic idea about love. Maybe it does exist (vacillates between identity and essence).
4. When Deucie is killed during a battle, Roy reverts to persona, thinking he was right about love before. He thinks she was killed because she loved him and because he was not taking care of her. He was just using her to help him achieve his selfish goals. (Fully in essence but reverts to persona one final time)
5. When one of the other characters—an adult woman—reveals to Roy that she loves him and has not died or run away, this disproves the lie he believes even more. Roy decides to take a risk and starts to believe it is possible he could love people and not get hurt. When he tries this, he starts to feel happy, loved, and able to help others. (Fully in essence)
6. Totally transformed, Roy gives up his plan to betray and abandon his new family and dedicates himself to loving and taking care of them. He decides to use the gold that he wanted and finally got his hands on to help his merry band of crazies to build houses and create their own town. (Transformed existence)

What can Roy do at the end of the story that he could not do in the beginning? Love without fear. His true essence is someone who needs love and wants to love.