

<https://youtu.be/S0QMxzEVuDI>

Hi, I'm Michael. This is Lessons from the Screenplay. At first glance, Michael Mann's 2004 thriller *Collateral* might seem like just another run-of-the-mill action movie. But in between its action sequences lies a well-crafted story of personal transformation over the course of a single, terrifying evening.

A cab driver, Max, is taken hostage by a hitman and forced to drive him around Los Angeles as he eliminates the targets on his list. This set up puts the protagonist and the antagonist in constant, direct conflict, allowing each of them to learn from each other.

And while you might not think that a ruthless murderer would be the best influence, as screenwriter Stuart Beattie says... "The killer's gotta have a point of view." "That was always the idea behind him-that he actually had some, you know, some solid viewpoints."

So today I want to examine why it's important that an antagonist represent everything the protagonist lacks... To look at how characters filled with contradiction can feel more true-to-life... And show why one of the most important moments of character change doesn't come at the end of the story, but directly in the middle.

Let's take a look at *Collateral*. Living in society is hard. We all have important goals we want to achieve, yet are often afraid to take the necessary steps to attain them. This tension is also found in great characters. As John Yorke writes in his book, *Into the Woods: A Five-Act Journey Into Story*...

"This conflict between who a character is, and who they want to be, is real life's gift to drama. Writers have always known that when their characters act in a manner they profess to disapprove of, when they lie, when they self-sabotage and generally act contrary to their conscious proclamations and beliefs, they are far more interesting, far more exciting to write, and feel far more true to life."

In *Collateral*, this contradiction is immediately apparent in the protagonist, Max. Max is not your typical cabbie. In his first scene, we see the juxtaposition between him and the other cabbies. "...some unshaven, swapping stories, counting cash, one stands on the passenger seat to shout over the roof to his pal, spills his coffee, couldn't care less..."

Not Max. His cab is fly. Among cabbies he is GQ.” We soon learn that this is because Max doesn’t think of himself as a cab driver. “...limo company I’m putting together. Island Limos. It’s going to be like an island on wheels. It’s going to be a cool groove, like a club experience. When you get to the airport, you’re not going to want to get out of my limo.

So I do this part-time until I get my Benzes off leases, staff up, get the right client list, you know, things like that.” “An uncomfortable beat.” This is Max’s facade. He wants to be thought of as someone who runs a successful, A-list limo company, so he presents himself as being just around the corner from making it a reality. After all, the cab driving is just temporary.

“I’m not in this for the long-haul. I’m just fillin’ in. It’s just temporary while I’m getting some things shaped up. This is just temporary” “How long you been driving?” “Twelve years.” “Hardly temporary...”

Here we see Max’s contradiction fully rendered. He wants to own a successful limousine company more than anything, yet he’s been driving a cab and making excuses for twelve years. This is his character’s flaw / weakness, and we soon see that his lack of self-confidence and inability to take risks are holding his inner self back.

In his book, John Yorke creates a simple visualization to help demonstrate the relationship between the facade and the inner self over the course of the story. The protagonist begins clinging to a facade— the idea of themselves that they want others to see.

But hidden away is their inner self— the part of them they must learn to embrace to become who they need to be. So what drives the character to change?

"What’s your name?"

"Max."

"Max? I’m Vincent."

Coming into conflict with the antagonist. A person uniquely suited to push the protagonist in exactly the right direction. And as John Yorke writes...

“The antagonist they fear, then – the ‘monster’ they must overcome - is the embodiment of the very thing lacking in themselves.”

The function of the antagonist is to strip away the facade of the protagonist and force the inner self to rise up. Enter Vincent. A well-dressed man of action who plays by his own rules, he is the anti-Max in almost every way. When Max picks up Vincent and agrees to be his taxi for the evening, he has no idea what he has really signed up for. (loud crash)

“Oh no! You killed him?”

“No. I shot him. The bullets and the fall killed him.”

And while this is clearly the worst night of Max’s life, it’s also, in many ways, the best. Since Vincent is everything that Max isn’t, he directly and indirectly forces Max to stand up for himself and do things he never thought he could. For example, early on, cops stop the cab while there is a dead man in the trunk.

-“Get rid of ‘em.”

-“How?”

“You’re a cabby. Talk yourself out of a ticket.”

But Max isn’t able to.

"Get out the cab. Open the trunk. Come on."

He’s still clinging to his facade and suppressing his inner self. Luckily, the cops get called away before Vincent has to kill them. Later, Max’s boss call over the radio...

“Max? Max? You out there, you son of a bitch?”

To get him to stop calling, Vincent poses as an official, and encourages Max to stand up to him.

“You tell him to stick this cab up his fat ass.”

-“I can’t do that. That’s my boss.”

-“So?”

-“I need my job.”

-“No, you don’t.”

This chips away at Max’s facade, and forces the inner self to begin to emerge.

“And next time you pull any shit, I’m... I’m gonna stick this yellow cab up your fat ass.”

Over time, Max even starts to stand up to Vincent.

“Come on, Vincent, give the dude a pass.”

-“I’m working here.”

-“No, listen. You the one sitting here talking about improvisation. You like the guy, you like how he plays. Let’s just play a little jazz. Come on.”

-“Improv... That’s funny, coming from you.”

And when they visit Max’s mom in the hospital, the depth of Max’s facade is embarrassingly exposed.

-“Limousine companies.”

-“Is that right?”

“He drives famous people around.”

“Famous people. Limousine companies. Now that’s quite an achievement.”

At the end of the scene, Max steals Vincent’s briefcase— a demonstration of his inner self growing in strength. During the entire first half of the screenplay Vincent is destroying Max’s facade and teasing out

his inner self. And if we look at the the progression of these two lines, there is a clear trajectory.

The facade is chipped away at and the inner self is forced to rise until something happens— they collide at the midpoint of the story. John Yorke says of the midpoint:

“As a story progresses and need supplants want, the traits that help a character sustain their outer appearance are slowly transformed by the ‘better’ angels within. Need becomes conscious at the inciting incident, is embraced at the end of the second act, and at the midpoint triumphs for the first time. The subconscious has been dredged and brought to the surface to take over.”

The midpoint of Collateral is shortly after Max destroys Vincent’s files.

"You are screwing with my work!"

He needs the list of names to finish the job, so he sends Max in to talk to the dangerous drug lord, Felix.

“You go in there, say you’re me. Score the backups. They’ll be on flash drive or CD.”

“If I don’t pull it off, then...”

-“They will kill you.”

“I can’t do this. I can’t.”

This scene begins almost exactly halfway through the film’s runtime. And in this case, the screenplay creates a literal example of the metaphorical change happening in the story structure. To overcome his character’s weakness, Max has needed to be more like Vincent— the embodiment of everything he’s not. Now, his inner self and his facade collide, as he is asked to become Vincent.

“Say it’s Vincent. I’m Vincent.”

Inside the club, Max is threatened by Felix, and it’s clear that the old Max is not cutting it.

“So, tell me Vincent. What do you think?”

So just before the jig is up and Max is killed, his inner self truly takes over and for the first time we really see what he’s capable of.

“I think you should tell the guy behind me to put that gun down.”

-“What did you say?”

“I said, I think you should tell the guy behind me to put his gun away before I take it and beat his bitch ass to death with it.”

Soon, Vincent’s words are even coming out of Max’s mouth.

“Improvise. Adapt to the environment. Darwin. Shit happens. I Ching. Whatever, man. We gotta roll with it.”

“Gotta roll with it. Adapt. Darwin. I Ching.”

Max successfully acquires the list and makes it out alive. The midpoint represents an important change for the protagonist. As John Yorke writes...

“A new ‘truth’ dawns on our hero for the first time; the protagonist has captured the treasure or found the ‘elixir’ to heal their flaw.” But the story, obviously, isn’t over. And he goes on to write... “At this stage in the story they don’t quite know how to handle it correctly. The ‘journey back’ is therefore built on how the hero reacts to possessing the ‘elixir’ and whether they will learn to master it in a wise and useful way.”

The first half of the film was getting Max to recognize he can overcome his weaknesses. The question for the second half of the film is...will he? Collateral demonstrates how an antagonist can be designed to bring out the best version of the protagonist.

It shows that a character who expresses the contradictory nature of human beings not only feels more

realistic and relatable, but also lends itself to dramatic story structure. And it highlights the importance of the midpoint, the moment when the hero's inner self truly emerges for the first time.

In the case of Max, he must learn to use this newfound strength to try to survive the rest of this fateful night, which will leave one of the characters alive, and the other nothing more than collateral. Another thing I love about Collateral is that the antagonist goes on a character arc that is similar to the protagonist's.

The same way Vincent tears at Max's facade, so does Max tear at Vincent's. This was something I wanted to talk more about, but unfortunately it didn't fit the flow of the video. So I took that section of the script and made it a blog post available on my website.

This process was simple and quick because I use Squarespace. Starting with one of their designer templates made setting up my website easy, and adding features like a place to sign-up for my newsletter is always a hassle-free experience. So if you're looking to share your ideas with a new blog, or simply want a beautiful website to showcase your work, make it with Squarespace.

Head to [Squarespace.com](https://www.squarespace.com) slash L-F-T-S for a free trial, and when you're ready to launch, use the offer code L-F-T-S to save 10% on your first purchase of a website or domain. Thanks to Squarespace for sponsoring this video. Hey guys! Hope you enjoyed the video.

I just set up a Discord server for my Patreon supporters where we discuss movies we're watching, share works in progress, and occasionally share cute pictures of our pets. So if you want to support the channel and chat about movies on Discord, head to my Patreon by clicking on the link below. Thanks for watching, and I'll see you next time.