

The short story, “Exit Music” by Chris Drangle, both follows and breaks the sequence Freytag’s Pyramid establishes. Freytag’s Pyramid is a diagram that displays the traditional idea of a plot sequence: exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution, and finally, conclusion. “Exit Music” consists of two plots: one that follows Freytag’s Pyramid to a tee, and another that completely scrambles the traditional sequence of plots.

The first plot is introduced at the beginning of the narrative, through the main character, Lee, and his partner who is soon introduced as Stan. This first plot unfolds throughout the majority of the story, opening with the exposition. This exposition is concise, and is captured within the first sentence of the story: “Lee is dreaming about a call coming through when a call comes through” (Drangle, p. 1). This sentence provides an introduction to the main character and the establishment of the scene.

Following the exposition, the inciting incident is introduced. The woman’s accident with James and Emily is the incident that incites the emergency call, destabilizing Lee’s previous “dreaming”. The rising action encompasses everything from the moment Lee and Stan confront the woman, to the second before the helicopter arrives.

The existing conflict, the accident, is intensified by the discovery of the motorcycle debris, the leg, and eventually, James Lattimore, in addition to the increasingly ominous atmosphere, as described, “It’s pitch black on the road. Not even the stars are out” (Drangle, p. 4). The descriptive imagery of the setting builds suspense with the darkness of the night and the sinister sounds from the foliage: “There is no sound louder than the cicadas in the leaves... [The foliage] forms a wall almost shoulder height, and the headlights only penetrate a few inches into the gloom beyond” (Drangle, p. 6). Tension is further increased by expressions of Lee’s uneasiness in this environment: “Lee tries to whistle, but his mouth is dry. He feels like a kid left

alone after a horror movie... Lee has the uncomfortable feeling that something large could hide [in the foliage], and could be watching them” (Drangle, p. 6). This increasing intensity is the rising action.

The climax of this plot arrives with the helicopter. As soon as the helicopter is in sight of the medics, the mood eases. Lee and Stan wheel James into the helicopter, and it takes off as police and a tow truck arrive, alleviating the haunting aura of isolation the quiet road formerly held. In this scene, Stan points out the one remaining anomaly of the situation: the violin case. This scene is the climax in its entirety because it is the moment of greatest emotional intensity and the turning point of the story where the initial conflict is resolved while another mystery is introduced. At this point, the fate of all characters is clear: the medics have done their jobs, and James will receive the help he needs. However, the violin case presents a small plot twist that transitions into the second plot.

As for this first plot, the falling action is signified by Lee’s release of all tension: “Lee is breathing easier... They have done their job as they are supposed to... the grisly details are made acceptable because it all turns out OK. The thought calms his nerves. Thankful for this ending, he tilts his head back, closes his eyes, and just listens” (Drangle, p. 8). Nature aids in this relief by adding “the thrumming of the cicadas” and “the stars that have finally emerged, radiating for miles in every direction” (Drangle, p. 8). These descriptions allow the reader to conclude that the medics and James have all reached a resolution.

The second plot of “Exit Music” is experienced by James Lattimore. This sequence is presented out of order. It follows the order of falling action, exposition, the inciting incident, rising action, climax, and finally ends with an unclear resolution. James’ perspective is introduced as he is wheeled into the helicopter to receive medical attention. This scene relieves

the greatest emotional intensity of the second plot, the crash; therefore it is the falling action of this sequence.

The exposition of the second plot occurs at the end of the story. James reflects on what happened before the accident, introducing his situation. “They had been at his older brother’s house. Just kissing so far” (Drangle, p. 9). The exposition is the second event of this plot sequence, when, according to Freytag’s Pyramid, it should be the first.

Following the exposition is the inciting incident: the violin case slipping. This single incident leads into the rising action: “The case slipped, and he grabbed it and held it against his leg, then passed it to her to tie down on the rack, all while they were driving... He had been focused on the hand she kept on his side, and she had been focused on lashing the case” (Drangle, p. 9). These lines epitomize the rising action, describing an intensifying conflict as neither occupant pays attention to the road.

The rising action flows directly into the climax, encasing the moment in two sentences: “Then there were headlights. One of them gasped, he doesn’t know which” (Drangle, p. 9). The moment of the crash, when Emily flew into the bushes, presumably never to be found, is the moment that changes both James and Emily’s lives forever. This moment makes the reader gasp as the excitement peaks in this plot sequence.

The second plot moves directly from climax to resolution, as James begins to lose consciousness for what the reader may safely assume is an eternity. Although the only difference between Freytag’s Pyramid outline and the sequence of the second plot is the point at which the falling action is presented, it gives the entire story a different element of suspense and thrill than what it would have possessed following a traditional plot sequence.

The way the two plots in this story are presented makes the story more thrilling to read. If I had known at the beginning that Emily was the presence Lee felt watching him from the bushes, the mood of the story would not have been as eerie. The addition of the second plot resolved the cliffhanger of the first plot while leaving one of its own. The violin case is explained, but the reader must decide whether James' drift into unconsciousness is permanent or not. Not knowing makes the story more thrilling, engaging the reader in mystery without keeping him or her completely in the dark.

The game the medics play at the beginning of the story where they choose entrance music, and eventually "exit music" to accompany their possible deaths, foreshadows the resolution of the second plot. It is safe to assume that James died imagining the sound of Emily playing and that she also did not make it because she was never found. By that assumption, Emily's music is James' exit music. Upon first read, it may be unclear, but every part of the story has a full-circle connection; the medics' game, the violin, Emily and James, and the suspense built by the minor characters like the woman and the police officer throughout the story. The way the two plot sequences were combined created a story worth analyzing and reading twice.

"Exit Music" exemplifies that stories can be brilliant whether a plot is traditional or not. It also provides the perfect side-by-side comparison of a traditional plot sequence following Freytag's Pyramid, and a nontraditional sequence as presented in the second plot. Even the absence of a clear resolution can still enhance a fantastic story. My verdict is that there is no set sequence or even a fixed number of events in a plot. The competence of a story does not lie in its plot sequence or its phases. Linear, traditional or not, the presentation of the plot is what keeps a reader reading, and is, therefore, the foundation for any well-written story.