

The idea of plot is one that has shaped humanity. Every story has a plot, that much has been confirmed. For centuries, stories have been used to teach and reflect morality, history, and creativity. From oral epics like *The Odyssey* to religious masterpieces like the Bible, to classic novels and short stories like those by Mark Twain, stories have always had plots. However, the sequence of events that compose a plot is not so definite. 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; but many stories do not follow this layout. The short story, "Exit Music" by Chris Drangle, both follows and breaks the sequence Freytag's Pyramid establishes.

"Exit Music" is a story consisting of two plots: a plot that follows Freytag's Pyramid to a tee, and a plot that completely scrambles the traditional sequence of plots. The first plot is introduced at the very beginning of the narrative, exposed through whom a reader would assume is 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 can be captured in the very 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 initial main character and the establishment of a scene. Although a time and place are not described from the very beginning, the reader can infer that Lee is riding as a medic in an ambulance at night from the next paragraph where the narrator describes the "blackness ahead and behind... and wood fern rushing past on the sides and pulsing red in the emergency lights" (Drangle, p. 1). Following the exposition, the inciting incident is introduced when the emergency

call comes in. The woman's accident with James and Emily is the inciting incident, as it is what leads to the emergency call that destabilizes Lee's previous "dreaming". The rising action encompasses everything from the moment Lee and Stan confront the woman about the accident, to the second before the helicopter arrives. The existing conflict that is the accident is intensified by the discovery of the motorcycle debris, the leg, and eventually, James Lattimore, in addition to the increasing ominous atmosphere. "It's pitch black on the road. Not even the stars are out" (Drangle, p. 4). Suspense is built by the imagery of the setting describing 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 the 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). 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 had. In this same scene, Stan pointed 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 overall conflict is resolved while another mystery is simultaneously introduced. At this point, the fate of all characters is adequately clear: the medics have done their jobs, and James will receive the help he needs. However, the violin case provides a small plot twist that allows the transition 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). Here is the falling action that allows the reader to conclude that everything has resolved and that the medics and James have all met a resolution to their problems.

The second plot of "Exit Music" is the sequence experienced by James Lattimore. Unlike the first plot which followed the outline of Freytag's Pyramid, the second plot in "Exit Music" is presented out of order. The second plot follows the sequence of falling action, exposition, the inciting incident, rising action, climax, and finally ends with an unclear resolution. James is introduced after the ambulance has been called for him, and as he is wheeled into the helicopter to receive medical attention. This scene is the falling action of the second plot because it is the moment that relieves the greatest emotional intensity of the second plot: the crash. After the falling action occurs first in the second plot sequence, the reader gets the exposition of the second plot. At the very end of the story, the exposition to the second plot is introduced. James' thoughts as he lies in the helicopter are reflections on what happened before the accident, the introduction to his situation. "They had been at his older brother's house. Just kissing so far" (Drangle, p. 9). This exposition is the second event of the second plot sequence we receive, when traditionally, according to Freytag's Pyramid, it would be the first. Following the exposition is the inciting incident: the violin case slipping. This single incident leads right 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... Emily, though: he loves the way she holds his waist when they're on the bike. 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 a conflict intensifying as a dangerous act is performed on the motorcycle at night with neither occupant paying sufficient attention to the road. This rising action flows directly into the climax, embodying 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 second plot sequence. Subsequently, the falling action happened when the woman called the ambulance and James received help, however, as aforementioned, this falling action appeared first in the second plot sequence, as it was introduced before the rest of the sequence; at the beginning of the story. Therefore, the sequence in the presentation of the second plot goes directly from climax to resolution, as James goes from remembering the climax to losing consciousness, his last thoughts being of Emily's music as he loses consciousness for what the reader may safely assume is an eternity. Although the only difference between the 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 were presented made 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 was

crafted in a way that it resolved the cliffhanger left by the first plot while leaving another one of its own. The violin case is explained, but the reader must decide whether James' drift into unconsciousness is permanent or not. This unknown provides a thrill that makes the story more exciting, keeping the reader drawn in by mystery without keeping him or her completely in the dark. The details of the medics' relationship also provided an extra element of surprise, hinting to the resolution of the second plot. I took note of the game the medics played with each other, choosing entrance music, and eventually "exit music" to accompany their possible deaths. When I first read the ending of the story, which is also the resolution of the second plot, I was confused as to what happened to James Lattimore, but I realized that the music of Emily that James hears as he loses consciousness is his exit music. I suppose it is safe to assume that James died imagining the sound of her playing and that she also did not make it because she was never found. The ending was the most surprising part of the story for me because it all just clicked and made sense. I tried to determine the relevance of Stan and Lee's game after my first read, but I saw no connection between the two plots. However, after staring blank for a moment, after reanalyzing what I had read, I realized that every part of the story had 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 executed created a story worth analyzing and reading twice.

I believe stories can be brilliant whether a plot is traditional or not. "Exit Music" provides the perfect opportunity to perform a side-by-side comparison of the traditional plot sequence exemplified by Freytag's Pyramid, and the nontraditional plot sequence presented in the second plot. Even the absence of a clear resolution can still result in 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; it lies in the presentation of the content. Linear, traditional or not, the presentation of the plot is what keeps a reader reading, and is, therefore, the foundation for a story of potential.