

***BRAVEHEART'S* Moral Premise and William Wallace's Moment of Grace (1)**

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The Center of all Successful Stories

All successful movies are about an imperfect protagonist whom, in an attempt to improve his life, sets off on a quest toward a physical goal, but along the way is met by a series of physical obstacles of ever increasing difficulty.

Yeah, you're right. That's old news.

But here's the twist that's as old as storytelling. Every one of those physical obstacles that the protagonist confronts is rooted in a single psychological, spiritual, or emotional obstacle. And to overcome the many physical obstacles, the protagonist must first overcome the singular psychological obstacle that his journey, and the movie, is really about. That single psychological obstacle is summed up by the Moral Premise — *a statement of truth about the protagonist's psychological predicament.*

In successful movies, that psychological truth or Moral Premise is offered up to the protagonist in multiple ways and times. But usually there is one subtly dramatic moment where the Moral Premise is the most clear. Often it's in a scene about half way through the movie. It's an offering of grace — a solution to the protagonist's dilemma — that makes crystal clear the fundamental conflict of the protagonist's journey. It's a moment some story theorists call the "Moment of Grace." In that scene, or moment, the protagonist is confronted with an understanding of the human condition in light of the Moral Premise and his own predicament. Although he may not consciously or fully understand the truth that the Moral Premise offers, he still is given a choice to accept the truth or reject it. If the protagonist embraces the truth and tries to apply it to his predicament, the story ends happily. If the protagonist rejects the truth of the Moral Premise, the story ends sadly.

That is a natural law of storytelling structure. If we as filmmakers get it right, our stories or movies have a chance at success. If we get it wrong, regardless of our craft, the budget, star attachments, or marketing efforts, our film will not be as successful as it could be, if it's successful at all. As we see in a moment, Randall Wallace got it right with *Braveheart*.

The Form of the Moral Premise

While the Moral Premise can be summarized or short-handed in a number of ways, there is a form that is comprehensive and useful. It is comprised of four parts: (1) a virtue, (2) a vice, (3) desirable consequences (success), and (4) undesirable consequences (defeat). These four parts can be used to create a statement that describes precisely what a movie is really about, on both physical and psychological levels. This is the formal structure of a Moral Premise:

*[Vice] leads to [defeat], but
[Virtue] leads to [success].*

Here are two examples. *City Slickers'* Moral Premise can be expressed this way:

*Selfishness leads to sadness and frowns, but
Selflessness leads to happiness and smiles.*

Die Hard's Moral Premise can be expressed this way:

*Covetous hatred leads to death and destruction, but
Sacrificial love leads to life and celebration.*

Braveheart

Now, let's look briefly at *Braveheart* and how the true Moral Premise of the film, and the protagonist's Moment of Grace, create the psychological and spiritual backbone that allows of the story to connect with audiences. A beat-by-beat description of *Braveheart's* plot and the moral premise's development can be found in the last chapter of my book upon which this essay is adapted.

Braveheart, the Best Picture for 1995, is the story of William Wallace, a commoner of unique passion and skill, who unites Scotland in the 13th century by giving up his life for freedom and setting the stage for Robert the Bruce to rid Scotland of King Edward I (a.k.a. Longshanks) army and English tyranny.

In deciphering *Braveheart's* Moral Premise there are several strong themes that deserve consideration: (a) the power of love's embrace to loosen the stranglehold of hate; (b) the two contrary and ironic roads to peace — the acceptance of tyranny and its demeaning violation, or the struggle for freedom and its embrace of death; (c) the sources of compromise — greed and

treachery — as avoiders of war; and (d) aristocracy's call to use their position to protect the common people.

To zero-in on the Moral Premise it will help to examine any recurring motifs or patterns of cause and effect, especially the actions taken by protagonists and antagonists and the resulting consequences. One motif is the continual cowardice of the Scottish nobles as they compromise their country's liberty in exchange for titles, estates, and gold. The result is a cruel oppression of the commoner and an increasingly heavy English tax. But such is the price of peace, reason the nobles, and thus, begrudgingly, they give their allegiance to Longshanks whose predictable response is further enslavement.

Things begin to change, however, when William Wallace secretly marries his childhood friend, Murron. Days later, an English soldier tries to rape her. Wallace helps her fight the soldier off, then puts her on a horse to spirit her away before he too flees into the woods. But, unseen by Wallace, Murron is captured by another soldier and taken to the English magistrate. Angry that a King's soldier has been assaulted, the magistrate takes the opportunity to demonstrate English contempt for the rights of commoners. With disdain he publicly slits Murron's throat, and challenges Wallace to seek revenge. Although Wallace had before refused to entertain rebellion against the English, now he takes up the reins of leadership... and freedom — Wallace's battle cry to his dying breath.

Midway through the film (at 1 hr. 35 min.) Wallace angrily addresses the Scottish nobles who moments before have knighted him as guardian and high protector of Scotland. The scene is Wallace's Moment of Grace. Not only does he accept the truth of the story's moral premise, but he articulates it with force, and embraces the physical side of the moral premise as his life's goal:

WILLIAM WALLACE

You're so concerned with squabbling
for the scraps from Longshank's
table that you've missed your God-
given right to something better.
There is a difference between us.
You think the people of this
country exist to provide you with
position. I think your position
exists to provide those people with

freedom. And I go to make sure that
they have it.

This speech summarizes well the two sides of the story's Moral Premise. The vice is the nobles' cowardly compromise encouraged by their greed for position, and the virtue is their divine call to sacrificially provide their people with freedom — something our hero takes up as his own call. What is also evident is that the commoner alone cannot win Scotland's freedom. From the first images of the movie to nearly the last, commoners die with little progress toward true liberty. It is only when the rightful ruler of Scotland, Robert the Bruce, takes up the battle cry for liberty that freedom comes. Therefore, the long form of *Braveheart's* Moral Premise is:

*The willingness of leaders to compromise liberty leads to tyranny; but
The willingness of leaders to die for liberty leads to freedom.*

Or, to put it succinctly:

*Compromise of liberty leads to tyranny; but
Dying for liberty leads to freedom.*

(1) Adapted and Excerpted from *The Moral Premise: Harnessing Virtue and Vice for Box Office Success* by the author Stanley D. Williams Ph.D.; published by Michael Wiese Productions, and available in bookstores nationally. This essay: Copyright 2006, Stanley D. Williams. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.MoralPremise.com>