

Introduction to The Moral Premise: Making Movies about One Thing

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This essay will introduce you to an all-important concept that must exist in your movie if the story is to connect with a mainstream audience. The full treatment of this concept can be found in my book, *The Moral Premise: Harnessing Virtue and Vice for Box Office Success* published by Michael Wiese Productions. The book fully describes the definitions, history, theory and a practical step-by-step approach for using a true *Moral Premise* in any narrative story, and particularly in making movies. What follows is a very brief introduction.

OVERVIEW

The *true Moral Premise* has been around since the first stories were ever told. In short, a *true Moral Premise* is a one-sentence description of the physical and psychological arcs of the movie's main characters. The Moral Premise focuses the storytelling in one direction and inextricably links the main characters' motivations with their physical action. The psychological arcs through which the characters travel relate to the virtuous or villainous decisions they make; and the physical arcs through which they travel demonstrate the natural consequences of those decisions. Research of box office receipts have shown that the consistent, true portrayal of these relationships is absolutely necessary if a story is to be successful. This is true regardless of who is directing, what stars are attached, or the size of the production and marketing budgets.

FORM OF THE MORAL PREMISE

The Moral Premise statement has four parts: A virtue, a vice, a description of desirable consequences (success), and a description of undesirable consequences (defeat). These four parts can be used to create a statement that describes precisely what a movie is about, on both physical and psychological levels. Here is the formal structure; terms in brackets are replaced with specific and logically related descriptors.

[Vice] leads to [defeat], but

[Virtue] leads to [success].

For example, *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 described this way:

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

BENEFIT OF KNOWING

The great benefit of knowing your story's true Moral Premise, aside from dramatically improving box office sales, is the virtual elimination of writer's block, and supercharging your writing efficiency. Remember those writing books that suggested you put a key word in bold letters above your typewriter¹ or computer reminding you what the story is about -- like "PERSEVERANCE" or "INTEGRITY"? Well, the Moral Premise is the same sort of focused writing aid, except it describes not only the focus of your protagonist, but also the antagonist, and the natural consequences that result from those foci. In that way the Moral Premise can remind you more clearly what that one thing is that your movie is *really* about.

A GOOD MOVIE IS ABOUT ONLY ONE THING

I'm sure you've heard this before, but all successful box office movies must be about only *one thing*. Various contemporary screenwriting gurus use different terms in their books to describe the utter importance of this one thing, but most of them spend less than a page describing it. Robert McKee calls it the "controlling idea." Michael Tierno calls it the "action-idea" derived from Aristotle's analysis of stories. Michael Hauge refers to "theme", Syd Field the "interior life," and Christopher Vogler (and James Campbell) call it the "elixir" or the "lesson learned." And Lew Hunter suggests that it's what the film is "really about." With all these different terms (and there are more) it seemed appropriate that the *one thing* should have *one name*, and a more detailed explanation of what, why, and how this critical concept could be applied in writing and making movies.²

¹ I'm told that some great and prolific writers still alive use these.

² Lajos Egri, in *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, does give the concept of the Moral Premise a book long treatment; he calls it simply the premise. But all of his examples are stage plays, and he does not tell the writer how to imbue a Moral

I decided to name this story phenomenal after the two essential traits present in all successful stories. First, all successful stories are like informal arguments that present evidence toward some conclusion. In the courtroom every piece of evidence, like the final conclusion, is called a premise. In a story the individual scenes are like the pieces of evidence or premises. Second, as the scenes and evidence piles up, the story takes us to a physical climax and more importantly a psychological or moral conclusion. It is that moral conclusion, or moral premise, on the psychological level that drives everything physical that we see on the screen. That may seem strange to some readers, so let me explain.

MORAL THOUGHT PRECEDES PHYSICAL ACTION

Every physical action taken by a human being (except those automatic responses like breathing) is preceded by a psychological thought. While a film director can only tell a story through what is seen or heard, all of the action began from something invisible—a character's motivation, or what the character thinks is important. And what a character thinks is important is totally based on that character's moral values. You might think of "motivation" as the contraction of "moral activation" or moral action. When an actor asks the director, "What is my motivation?" he or she is asking, "What's psychologically important in my character's life that would cause this action?" In short, physical action is always caused by moral thought. This is even true in "pure" action movies, which I explain in the book.

But, of course, there are two sides to everything. And without an antagonist who has values contrary to your protagonist's values, your story would be pretty dull. It is this conflict of psychological values that creates the physical drama. And it is this conflict that is summarized in the Moral Premise statement, which drives the story forward.

NATURAL LAW

For your story to be accepted by mainstream audiences your Moral Premise must be true or consistent with natural law. When I use the term "natural law" I include everything from nature's law of gravity to a human being's feelings of injustice. A friend used to tell his children, "You can make any decision you want, but you have *no* choice over the consequences." A car driver can make the decision to run a red light, but he

Premise in a new story. It was Egri's excellent insight and his books lack of application to motion pictures that motivated me to write *The Moral Premise*.

won't have much of a choice as to whether he gets a ticket from a cop, or a box from an undertaker. A character can decide to step off a 400-foot cliff; but gravity and the specific-gravity of the rocks below will determine the consequence. Another character can decide to commit adultery; but a sense of injustice of the jilted will determine the litany of consequences. In these ways your Moral Premise and the events in your movie must be true.

DISCOVERING YOUR STORY'S MORAL PREMISE

Discovering the true Moral Premise for your story may come about a number of ways, depending on how the story idea came to you, what stage of writing you're in, and whether you're a right or left-brain type of thinker. Although Part 2 of my book outlines a step-by-step process, there is no right way to come up with a true moral premise. It does not matter how you get there, only that your movie (in all its disciplines and departments) consistently applies a true Moral Premise to the psychological and physical arcs of your characters, as well as to the art direction, music, and other variables that support the visual and aural storytelling.

There are many more intricacies about the Moral Premise that can help you structure your story, your acts, each sequence, each scene, and even each line of dialogue. The Moral Premise will also tell you a great deal about your plot's turning points, climaxes, and endings. Central to these structural tools is what narrative theorists call the "moment of grace"—a subtle, but magical event in the middle of every character's storyline that enlightens their struggle but ultimately determines their fate. But space here is limited, and that's why there's the book.

Good luck to all of you, and I wish you all great success.