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**The Protagonist's "Character Arc",
The Rise and Fall,
And all that lies between.**

Research paper - Original Screenplay - Sins of the Mother

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ABSTRACT

Sins of the Mother is as provocative as the title indicates. The feature length script, set in the present time in Auckland City, explores the tumultuous relationships between mothers and daughters. It focuses on Charlie, her daughter Lacy and her mother, and her struggles with her unresolved conflicts which get in the way of her ultimate goal: to be a good mother to her 17 year old daughter and to be a good daughter to her mother, Nana Jeannie. This dysfunctional unit sees the three women thrown into turmoil when young Lacy is raped... and the film begins as each deals with this trauma in their own way. This lights the fuse for past hurts, indiscretions and betrayals, real or perceived, within all three women. This is a love story, not in the romantic sense of the word, but just as powerful is the love between a mother, her child and a grandchild.

This Exegeses looks at the development of the main protagonist from the original idea through to the second draft paying particular attention to the structure, cause and effect of the construction of the inner conflict, and the response to this with regard to her character development and, inevitably, her character arc.

I will explore this multi-layered emotional and physical journey of Charlie's and her responses to her mother and her daughter, as her main antagonists, with a focus on how Charlie's unresolved conflict impacts on her character arc as she constantly battles, not only with external forces, but her inner conflict. Her self-doubt is cleverly masked by her actions, making her own vulnerability less obvious. I will look at the problems associated with my creation of character, character arc and inner conflict in regard to keeping to the rules attributed to screenwriting.

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1. RESEARCH QUESTION

How does the main character's unresolved conflict impact her character arc?

In order to ascertain how this research question is essential to my screenplay, we first have to consider the question, "What is character?"

"Action is character; what a person does is who he is, not necessarily what he says." Syd Field

"A character is what it does." Linda Aronson

"TRUE CHARACTER is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure – the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation, the truer the choice to the character's essential nature." Robert McKee

One thing that is not contested is that character is the foundation, the heart and the soul of a story and the writer must know their characters and what makes a good one. Four things make character in writing: dramatic need, point of view, attitude and change. ¹

So how does my protagonist, Charlie, stack up to the definitions of the masters of screenwriting, and how does she compare with characters in films of the same genre or theme?

¹

Syd Field - The Screenwriters Problem Solver - 2009

Sins of the Mother is a “siege film” with troubled families with an emotional social siege playing out².

The film’s main protagonist of three, is both a mother and a daughter who does not know how to be either. A multiple-protagonist film is described as “same theme/ different adventure”, or a story that revolves around an event that is experienced by all the characters. This may prove confusing as the “rape” is only experienced by Lacy, however the fallout affects her mother, Charlie, and grandmother, Nana Jeannie. The following is a list of films I feel to be similar to *Sins of the Mother*:

Mother and Child (2009) is a tandem narrative that centres around three women: Karen, a 50-year-old woman, Elisabeth, the daughter she gave up for adoption 35 years ago, and Lucy, an African American woman looking to adopt a child of her own.

The film sees Karen’s and Elizabeth’s stories run alongside each other. The similarities between these two characters are obvious: both are socially inept and awkward, and make decisions based solely on their need to further themselves both personally and professionally. The grandmother features early on in the story but dies, freeing her daughter Karen to live; however she does not know how to, as she has spent her life being her mother’s care-giver. The old lady never forgave Karen for getting pregnant at 14, and Karen never forgave herself for giving her daughter up for adoption. Once freed, Karen mourns for her mother and the daughter (Elizabeth) she gave up. Her life has turned her into a bitter, highly strung, anxious person who alienates people.

² Linda Aronson - *The 21st Century Screenplay* 2010 – pg. 178

She meets and marries Paco. He persuades her to write a letter to her, now adult, daughter and leave it at the adoption agency. I did not find her character endearing at all. Her internal conflict was evident with her guilt and bitterness but her character arc was so slight that it almost did not matter that she became a bit “nicer”.

Karen sets about finding her daughter, Elizabeth, who is an independent, cold, calculating, promiscuous woman who has an affair with her boss and becomes pregnant. She never wanted children. Elizabeth lashes out when it is expected by those around her that she will terminate or give the baby up for adoption. These options had never entered her mind. She also leaves a letter at the adoption agency for her biological mother, Karen, but for a different reason: Elizabeth wants to know her medical history...Elizabeth dies giving birth.

Lucy and Joseph's story, the sub plot see them wanting to adopt and jumping through every hoop in order to be “selected” by a birth mother. Once the child is born, the biological mother changes her mind. Lucy is devastated. She and Joseph split after he reveals he wants a biological child. When no one comes forward to claim Elizabeth's baby, the agency offers her to the now single Lucy, who adopts her. A year later, when Karen finds out about Elizabeth's death and that she has a granddaughter, Ella, she arranges to meet her.

The character arcs and internal conflicts are similar in *Sins of the Mother*: guilt, abandonment and rejection; although their stories run alongside each other (tandem narratives), and *Sins of the Mother* is played out within a family unit that threatens to be torn apart (multiple protagonist narrative).

The characters in each film want the same things: redemption. This is one of the only films that feature grandmother/mother and daughter.

Thirteen (2003), a mother/daughter film is a coming of age biographical film that saw the international press rave. USA Today gave it four (out of four), American Film critic Roger Ebert gave it 3.5 out of 4. Most of its reviews were favourable. Technically I saw this film more like an observational documentary: a slice of life where we watched a series of events unfold and the characters did not go through any transformations or arcs. Although the protagonist is supposed to be a good girl gone bad, I saw a good student with good friends, who wanted to popular, so ditched both. I failed to see the good. I felt nothing for any of the characters, nor did I empathise with any of them, which in turn compelled me to make my protagonist, Charlie, and the antagonist, Lacy, more likeable by adding more layers to their characters and more obstacles for them to act upon. This helped me shape their characters, for example when Charlie stops to help old George who is being attacked by young thugs, she does not hesitate at all. She has no concern for her own safety or that she will be late to pick up Lacy, she runs straight over to help. Lacy lashes out at her mother. Not waiting for an explanation, she assumes that her mother simply forgot. Charlie does not see the need to justify herself and ends up having a huge fight with Nana Jeannie.

Lacy feels bad and waits for Charlie after she storms off but Charlie doesn't come home until 3am. By this time Lacy has fallen asleep in her mother's bed. Again, misunderstandings cause Charlie to over react and the cycle repeats.

Although *Thirteen* is the daughter's story, as opposed to *Sins of the Mother* being Charlie's story, (although Charlie is a daughter as well) there are parallel issues. Crime, drugs, unwanted pregnancies, a mother who is emotionally absent and a recovering alcoholic who has no real idea about her daughter's life. In his review, Roger Ebert says:³

"There are moments when you want to cringe at the danger these girls are in. They slip through the bedroom window and hang out on Hollywood Boulevard, they experiment sexually with kids older and tougher than they are, they all but rape "Luke the lifeguard boy" (Kip Pardue), a neighbour who accuses them, accurately, of being jail bait. They want to fly close to danger without getting hurt, and we wait for them to learn how hard and cruel the world can be."

But the problem as I see it, is they never do get hurt, they learn nothing, they don't grow and they continue on their selfish path. The popular girl's internal characteristics were never really made clear, which made it hard to empathise. Was she just a compulsive liar who revelled in the misfortune of others or did she experience some deep trauma in her childhood that led her to a self-destructive life. We don't know as this was never made clear.

³ <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/thirteen-2003>

The end – just ends. No lesson learnt. The girls split after having turned on each other, and it just ends; hence no pay off or resolution or character arc to speak of. I am not saying it has to be like this, but it's more reminiscent of a documentary than a film as it was written based on the true life events experienced by Nikki Reed, who co-wrote the screenplay when she was 15. It was shot like a documentary. The movie is said to be a truthful version of real experiences, like a documentary.

Two Women (1961) is based on the 1958 Italian-language novel by Alberto Moravia, and was adapted by Vittorio De Sica and Cesare Zavattini.

This mother/daughter film was set during WWII in Rome. Cesira is a beautiful widow running a small shop in Rome with her 12 year old daughter, Rosetta. Rome are being bombed by the allies and Cesira decides to retreat into the mountains to her native village. Cesira attracts the attention of a young local intellectual named Michele.

Rosetta sees Michele as a father figure and develops a strong bond with him. However, Michele is taken prisoner by German soldiers, who hope to use him as a guide into the mountains.

Once it is deemed safe, the mother and daughter make their way home but the pair are gang raped in a church. Rosetta is so traumatised, she becomes distant from her mother, who was her whole life. The two find shelter and Rosetta disappears in the night and sends her mother into a panic. Rosetta has sought the attention of an older boy whom she goes out dancing with. On her return, Cesira is outraged and upset, slapping Rosetta for her behaviour, but Rosetta remains unresponsive and emotionally distant.

When, however, Cesira informs Rosetta of Michele's death, Rosetta begins to cry like the little girl she had been prior to the rape, with her mother comforting the child.

This story is driven by the action where the mother and daughter have a goal: to get to safety. Although the mother does not seem to change outwardly throughout the film, the daughter, who was innocence personified and was gang raped, as expected, changed instantly, both externally and internally. As with Lacy's character, Rosetta shut down and then sought comfort in the company of a young man, who took her dancing. This seems to be out of character for someone who has not experienced anything of life, but I feel this may have been the only way the writer could have forced more to happen...if Rosetta shuts down, and becomes almost comatose, where to from there? Whereas Lacy had been in a bit of trouble before, not serious but she was already dabbling in drugs. This is revealed when the police woman recognises her and we see her expertise around drug culture.

The parallels between *Sins of the Mother* and *Two Women* are far reaching, but the action lines of both films force internal changes which are significant for both mothers and daughters.

Sherrybaby (2006) is a raw, riveting tale of a young mother and drug addict. Sherry (Maggie Gyllenhaal) is on parole after three years of being in prison. Her 5 year old daughter, Alexis was placed in the care of her brother Bobby and his wife who bring her up as their own child. Sherry struggles to adjust to life on the outside.

Ever present is the constant drug temptation and Sherry try's to form a meaningful relationship with her daughter as the time she is allowed to spend with her is limited.

This comparison is with Charlie and Sherry with her inability to adapt to being a mother and the lure of a life of drugs being only an "issue" away. Although *Sherrybaby* had a tragic ending, with the insinuation that Sherry's father had been interfering with her since she was a child, her constant struggle to be good mother to her young daughter was "forgiven" almost when this action was revealed, in the most disturbing way.

When Sherry turns to her father for comfort he betrayed her trust by sexually abusing her at Alexis' birthday and what makes it more disturbing is Sherry is a grown woman and her brother saw and no one said anything. This is Sherry's unresolved conflict, which remains unresolved but her character arc saw her making an altruistic decision – after she runs away with Alexis she realises she lacks the skills and means to cope with her child. She makes the decision a good mother would make, she did what was best for Alexis. She returned her to her brother and sister in law but insisted that she be allowed to be a part of Alexis' life, when she we felt better able to cope.

This is like Charlie's life before her own movie starts: Sherry's life is reflective of Charlie's internal characteristics and her unresolved conflict. Charlie is watching Lacy go down the same path as she did as a teenager and does not know what to do for her as she had little to do with her upbringing. Charlie is tempted to return to her addictions when she feels unable to cope.

Her rational approach to dealing with Lacy cannot compete with her mother's maternal approach which causes friction, and Charlie's feelings are of being unloved and replaced, as her mother's daughter, by her own daughter. When it is revealed that Charlie is a product of rape and her mother chose to keep her, her feelings of guilt compound and spin her into self-destruct mode.

2. WHY THE RESEARCH QUESTION IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF MY SCREENPLAY.

Synopsis of Sins of the Mother.

Three generations of women have their lives thrown into turmoil after the rape of Lacy (16). All three veer off onto their separate paths of grief, their learned patterns of coping shaped by guilt, past hurt and betrayal come to the forefront of their lives.

Charlie (35), in an effort to turn her life around, has recently returned to the family unit but is unsure as to her role as she left her infant daughter in the care of her mother.

Lacy, now a teen, feels Nana Jeannie is her mother and she too is unsure of Charlie's role in the family unit. Nana Jeannie feels that Charlie has never really needed her and has poured all her love and energy into raising Lacy in the hope that she might do a better job than she did with Charlie.

Lacy deals with the physical and mental trauma of the rape by shutting down and then resorting to drugs. Charlie sees this as a chance to prove she is a good mother by

trying to get justice for Lacy. When she fails, she tries to get help for Lacy and also fails but feels affronted when Nana Jeannie gets Lacy into a counselling group run at her work, The City Mission. But Nana Jeannie has ulterior motives.

Nana Jeannie wants to protect Lacy from everything and even when Lacy's decisions are not good for her, Nana Jeannie will not act in Lacy's best interests. This sees Charlie and Nana Jeannie lock horns, causing old wounds to open and Nana Jeannie wears the wrath of Charlie.

At her counselling group, Lacy falls into the arms of a young man she thinks is easily manipulated but she is proved wrong when he reacts violently to an innocent gesture by a tragic but devious prostitute.

Lacy reveals that she is pregnant by the rape and Charlie insists she get rid of it. Nana sides with Lacy but Lacy runs off to be with Hector. Charlie's anger turns to horror and then shame when she learns that she is a product of rape. Charlie, not able to cope, heads back into the world of drugs in an attempt to ease her pain. After being saved by Aqua, she seeks answers and when confronted with Lacy being beaten at the hands of Hector, she sacrifices her freedom and runs him down, killing him. This sacrifice is the key to bringing her family back together.

So what is the difference between her character and her characteristics and how does each impact on her unresolved conflict?

The main character is defined using the variables of 'Internal Characteristics' and 'External Circumstances'.⁴

Charlie's internal characteristics are formed by her memories, which are of abandonment, loss and rejection. She feels abandoned by her mother and loss when her mother takes Lacy to raise. It is interesting to note that Charlie feels or accepts no responsibility for any of these decisions that were made "for" her when she was a pregnant 18 year old, and no gratitude to her mother for taking care of her daughter when she couldn't.

Charlie was an unruly teenager who Nana Jeannie couldn't control on her own, and who decided to come back to live in NZ at age 15. Not long after, she got pregnant and Charlie left her daughter, at her mother's insistence, to pursue a better life, but instead chose a life of drugs. She became an addict and was absent from her daughter's and mother's lives until her daughter Lacy was a teenager. By this time, Nana Jeannie was ensconced in the mother role. Charlie decided to clean herself up and go back to university. She rejoined the family unit but always felt inadequate at home. When 16 year old Lacy starts misbehaving and ends up getting raped, the family begins to fall apart.

Charlie's external journey is one that she has no control over. Her past decisions hurt no one but herself; everyone in her circle was the same and there were no expectations of her and no responsibility. No pressure was put on her; therefore no defining

⁴ Syd Field - the Screenwriters Problem Solver –1998 . pg. 23

characteristics could be examined as there were no choices that she had to make, until she decided to leave that world behind and return to her mother and her daughter.

Once back in the family unit, she is a daughter and a mother and she doesn't know how to be either, so she continues to try to fix things without asking, or seeming to know, what is broken. Failure after failure sees her confidence dissipate, her family suffer, her school work suffer and then, after Lacy runs away to get away from her mother, Charlie once again comes face to face with the world that had threatened to consume her. The reality for her now is that she may lose her now pregnant daughter to that world.

Lacy is pregnant by the rapist and Nana Jeanie supports her, no matter what decision she makes, and Charlie tries to bully her into getting rid of it. Desperate times call for desperate measures. Getting ready to go fight to get her daughter back, in a world that she is all too familiar with, she hits the wall and slips back into the black hole when she finds out she is the product of rape.

This is a revelation Charlie cannot deal with and she spirals out of control, doing the only thing she knows when she cannot cope: heads back into the world that nearly consumed her. But she is saved and is thrust back into the lives of Nana and Lacy because now the danger is real for Lacy. Nana cannot save her, so Charlie must, and she does, with the help of her newly acquired family member and best friend, Aqua.

Why I chose this research question?

Character and conflict form the basis of what drama is, and when the characters and conflicts resonate, not only in the same gender but within the same family, this is bound to reveal some fascinating truths about the relationships between mothers and daughters.

Women's films, commonly referred to as melodramas, have strong messages – *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), *Beaches* (1988), *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), *Steel Magnolias* (1989) – loyalty, trust and sisterhood, tragedy and love

The mother/son movies that explore the relationship between a mother and her adult or teen son: *Bad Boy Bubby* (1993), *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), *Spank the Monkey* (1994), and *Psycho* (1960). Often have distorted or Oedipus leanings or one or the other is suffering from some form of mental trauma or illness.

I wanted to tell a story about three generations of women, who all have had trauma, both individually and as a unit, and how they deal with it, being as dysfunctional as they are.

The mother/daughter classic, *Stella Dallas* (1937), from the class conscious era of the 30s, is a classic depiction of a “Hollywood” mother/daughter relationship. This film epitomises the ultimate sacrifice of a loving mother who willingly gives up her equally loving daughter, but this is the 30s and your place in society means more than the loving

bond between a mother and a daughter so the conflict was not between a mother and her daughter, but with a culture obsessed by class.

A Taste of Honey (1961), *SherryBaby* (2006) and *Precious* (2009) are films about sacrifice, guilt, betrayal, abandonment, abuse, loss and pain and depict mothers who need to be fixed or pay the ultimate price: to lose their daughters. *Sins of the Mother* has two mothers than need to be “fixed”, Nana Jeannie and Charlie, but they can only be “fixed” by their own admission of their flaws. All of the above films have the most intense subject matter and they all have huge unresolved internal conflicts whose impacts make their characters unforgettable. This is what I hoped to achieve with *Sins of the Mother*.

What draws you (as a writer) to this topic?

It is as Melissa Silverstein from *Women and Hollywood* observes, “Women tell stories differently. We have different life experiences and those experiences inform our stories and the lenses through which we view the world.” This is a very personal story for me, being a mother, a daughter and now a grandmother, and the characters of Charlie, Nana Jeannie and Lacy are based loosely on these relationships. It is an integral part of my screenplay because it is a reflection of the arcs that we experienced during this episode in our lives that threatened to destroy us almost 15 years ago. Although I have used creative licence to add drama to the story by increasing the stakes, it still is representative of how we coped during that very traumatic time in our lives.

Sins of the Mother is an anomaly as it has a female lead, the main protagonists/ antagonists are female and the conflicts are mostly between the women. There is only one love interest, which is not really love...so already I have broken all the rules, which of course does not bode well for its commercial appeal.

However *Sins of the Mother* passes the Bechdel Test, with honours ! This a test that names the following three criteria:

(1) it has to have at least two women in it, who (2) talk to each other, about (3) something besides a man. (Alison Bechdel 1985)

I have also looked at the Russo test, in which *Sins of the Mother* also scores well.

The Russo test was introduced by the American lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) media organisation GLAAD. Its intent is to analyse the representation of LGBT characters in films. Inspired by the Bechdel test and named after film historian Vito Russo, it encompasses three criteria:

(1) The film contains a character that is identifiably lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender. (2) The character must not be solely or predominantly defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity. (3) The character must be tied into the plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect.⁵ With Aqua a very vocal and integral part of *Sins of the Mother* thats 3 for 3 in the Russo test as well!

⁵ <http://bechdeltest.com/>

The gender gap over the last 10 years also does not bode well for films with female protagonists. Women are still underrepresented in the commercial film world.

“The gender gap is documented in new research by the Centre for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University that found that females comprised a paltry 12% of protagonists in the top-grossing films of 2014. Over the past decade, the situation has gotten worse, not better. The latest figures represent a drop of three percentage points from 2013 and a fall of four percentage points from 2002”.⁶

We are so far down the food chain with regard to commercial viability and according to the statistics, *Sins of the Mother* is doomed to fail . What *Sins of the Mother* has is a range of characters, character arcs and conflicts at play...Charlie and Nana Jeannie – mother and daughter; Charlie and Lacy – mother and daughter; Nana Jeanie and Lacy – grandmother and daughter but surrogate mother and daughter. Not forgetting transgender best friend. All the characters experience shifts in their internal arcs but all want to arrive at the same place...together and in one piece. These are the components of a good heartfelt story and that is what I hope to achieve.

⁶ Variety Magazine Feb 2015. <http://variety.com/2015/film/news/women-lead-roles-in-movies-study-hunger-games-gone-girl-1201429016/>

Summarise why it is an integral element of this particular screenplay.

Robert McKee talks about characterisations being a fundamental part of character, and true character coming to light when the character is put under pressure and must make a choice to take either one of two paths in pursuit of his goal.⁷ The more pressure the character is under, the more we are able to decide about his essential nature, and decide the type of person he is, but again, pressure is essential.

When Charlie finds out that she is a product of rape, she could have either been overcome with love for her mother for the sacrifice she made, or been racked with guilt and shame and returned to a life of drugs. In other words, using artificial means to cope. Her inability to cope is real and her hit was twice as hard as she had tried to make Lacy get rid of the child she was carrying as a result of rape. It is at this point (Pg. 75 of the script) when Lacy crashes. The buildup is as follows using the Basic Nine Point Plan to illustrate Charlie's character development in relation to how her internal characteristics evolve as a response to the external circumstances.

⁷ <http://www.cienciasecognicao.org/rotas/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Robert-McKee-Story.pdf>

Charlie's character arc in response to her internal conflict and external circumstances.

SET UP – Pages 1 to 16

- NORMALITY** At university sitting in the front row, eagerly taking notes – confident, diligent, driven, focused (page 1)
- PROTAGONIST** Charlie Rivers (Aged 35)
- DISTURBANCE** Lacy (Aged 16) is raped – Charlie is agitated, abusive toward the police, argumentative to her mother and not able to comfort Lacy – confronts the rapist, Lacy angry, frustrated, fearless, emotionally unavailable.
- PLAN** Revenge. To get Lacy Help - To be a good mother, but she feels useless, inadequate, a failure.
- ANTAGONIST** Lacy, Nana Jeannie - status quo - the mother/daughter relationships

FIRST ACT – Pages 16 to 30

- TURNING POINT** **SURPRISE** - Police drop charges, Lacy spins out on drugs and hits Nana, Charlie manhandles Lacy – Lacy smokes drugs at home.
- Needs help. Charlie meets Donald Locke from Locke foundation. He is aloof once he finds out who she is. Charlie tries all the rehab places, no one can help. *Charlie feels she let Lacy down.*
- OBSTACLE** There are no rehabs to help Lacy - inadequate, failure

SECOND ACT – Pages 30 to 59

- TURNING POINT** She bangs into Aqua, talks about the rehab centre run by her grandparents, the Lockes. Charlie gets drunk, goes home, upsets the whole family. Lacy sleeps in Charlie's bed, Charlie sleeps in Lacy's but jumps to conclusions. She feels guilt but doesn't apologise. Charlie is suspicious of Lacy's boyfriend. Charlie takes Lacy out for dinner – to spend quality time together.
- Lacy tells Charlie she is pregnant by the rapist and that Nana took her to the doctor and Nana will support her decision. Charlie is furious at the fact they didn't tell her and that Nana is not making Lacy get rid of the baby. Lacy leaves the restaurant and meets Hector. Charlie stays and rings around to find out what she should do.
- OBSTACLE** Lacy goes to rehab that Nana Jeannie organised, – Charlie fails again. Lacy meets a boy at counselling. Charlie late to pick her up because she helps old George. Lacy goes with boy who is bad news. Nana suspects Lacy is pregnant. Lacy doesn't want to tell Charlie until she is sure. Nana agrees. Charlie and Nana have a huge fight, Nana tells Charlie to be more “present” in Lacy's life. Charlie reveals how she felt when she left home at 18. Upset, she leaves.

THIRD ACT – Pages 59 to 99

Hector beats up the rapist for Lacy – Charlie and Lacy have fight and Charlie slaps her. Lacy runs to Hector. Charlie fails at school, learns about her professor’s daughter being a meth addict. He suggests she go to the Locke’s. She is called back into the police station, two more girls have come forward. They will prosecute Joe. At the police station Charlie finds out she is the product of rape. Charlie goes on a bender. Gets saved by Aqua. Charlie gets beaten up by Rose, when Charlie is trying to save her. Charlie roams the streets, she can’t find Lacy. Rose is schooling her on working on the street. Hector finds out and goes hunting for her and beats Rose up. Nana gets caught up in the ambulance thinking Rose is Lacy. George gets beaten trying to help Lacy. Lacy gets beaten.

CLIMAX – Pages 99 to 105

Charlie runs over Hector, killing him. She goes to jail. George dies. Lacy is in hospital. Loses the baby. Charlie tells Prof Lou about the Locke’s. Prof gets the Locke’s to get Charlie out. Charlie has achieved her goal. She has sacrificed herself for Lacy and Jeannie. She protected her mother by not revealing her mother’s secret and protected Lacy by getting rid of Hector. She has a new sister in Aqua who was always part of the family anyway, just, now it’s official.

*Nine Point Plan - Thompson & Smiley*⁸

⁸ Linda Aronson - The 21st Century Screenplay 2010

Charlie's growth arc – the protagonist overcoming an internal characteristic: in Charlie's case, fear, loss, abandonment. This sees Charlie constantly in “fight or flight” mode and neither working well for her. What does play out in front of her is the relationship between Lacy and Nana Jeannie. Charlie interprets this as rubbing salt into an already festering wound as, try as she might, she does not have that relationship, either as a daughter or a mother.

3. RESEARCH & METHODOLOGY

The initial idea to progress with *Sins of the Mother* came after a discussion with my lecturer about intended audience or rather, the holy trinity, audience-budget story. It was a story I had been mulling over for years and I had committed it to paper but by no means had it in any kind of shape.

In early sessions in class, we watched *Juno* (2007), a coming of age film. It was during the analysis of this film, I was introduced to how to structure a character arc using two basic questions:

1. What does Juno want? Juno wants to find a good home for her baby.
2. What does Juno need? Juno needs to find peace and forgive her mother for abandoning her.

These questions started me on my quest to understand character arc and conflict and after writing the synopsis for *Sins of the Mother*, started to develop the characters in response to the action line.

I was so caught up in the action line causing change and inevitably causing character arcs and conflict resolution. But it didn't work and, try as I might to "increase" the stakes...it still had the same effect... no obvious character arc.

But still, I tried to come up with significant actions to drive the story. I tried to identify why each scene is a step toward the protagonist's goal (action line) or a significant moment between two characters (relationship line), but realised that I had to decrease the "action" and increase the "moments".

Because the first passes of *Sins of the Mother* were more like a Jason Stratham action movie, the action line had the most conflict. The action line was where the most effort was and the action line was the engine of tension. I did not want to write an action movie.

It seemed I was more centred on the action line because I made the mistake of thinking that the external action creates the inner arc. There were too many characters. So one by one, depending on their function and importance in the story, I set about culling. Who was necessary to the story and who wasn't – and a whole new story emerged.

The plots and sub plots were down to a third of what I started out with. When I was trying to solve the problems relating to Charlie's character, mostly to do with action and reaction, I had to go back and look at the dynamics of what made her "Her" – and most of it related back to unresolved conflict.

So what exactly was her unresolved conflict and how could I work it into the story without the dreaded "flashbacks"? I knew her "back story" was an integral part of the development of Charlie's character which is based on myself with the respective characters of Nana Jeanie and Lacy based on my mother and my eldest daughter. It only made sense that Charlie's back story be similar to my own, with creative licence to embellish or leave out what I felt appropriate while keeping Charlie's character "real".

It was these relationships that formed the foundation of the characters of Nana Jeannie, Charlie and Lacy; however with the subsequent lectures on the importance of character in "story" I had to delve deeper in "character" to bring Charlie to life on paper. With her character being formed around the rape, I had to stop thinking about what I did and started thinking what would Charlie do? And if I was honest, what I would have liked to have done but didn't have the gumption. I also realised I had written Charlie as the Hero, she saved the day. But Lacy was completely passive which made for boring conflict and no change in either character. The over bearing mother trying to save passive unresponsive sulky daughter, neither character was particularly endearing

They needed to be a reflection of each other. They both needed to be the "unstoppable force meets the immovable object". After all they are cut from the same cloth!

Syd Field talks about dramatic need. What is the dramatic need of your character? Do you know it? Can you articulate it? Can you trace through the events in the story so it reflects depth and change in character? ⁹

I had yet to make the distinction between knowing the characters of Charlie and Lacy and what each of their dramatic needs were. This was one of the biggest hurdles, but once I went back to the basics, I put down my pen and thought, what's the story about? My title is "*Sins of the Mother.*" Which mother? What sins? Then I thought again – Whose story is it?

I took a whiteboard and bought post it notes and plotted my story out. Who had the most screen time? Who made the decisions that moved the story forward? Where was the conflict? Who was the cause of conflict? What are the goals? What are the obstacles? I came up with a mosaic, where, to my delight, I could easily move everything at will.

It became apparent to me that all arrows pointed to Charlie. She was the main character. She was the one making the decisions; she was the one that was driving the story forward. Her actions caused the reactions of Lacy and Nana Jeannie. Although it's not a case of Charlie leads and everyone follows, it's more a case of Charlie is like a bulldozer, and if you don't get out of her way, she will mow you down. Shoot first, ask questions later.

⁹ Syd Field - The Screenwriters Problem Solver - 2009

4. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

List the ways in which this research question, topic or issue is explored in your completed second draft screenplay.

By the second draft screenplay, Charlie's unresolved conflict impacting on her character arc is clear. In separating the plot line arcs from the sub plot arcs, from the beginning of the story we see Charlie trying her hardest to be a good mother or what she sees as a good mother, which is a micro look at mothering and mother/daughter relationships.

In the first half of the story we see two mothers and two daughters. Charlie, who is a mother and a daughter, responds to a rape in three very different ways.

On Page 10, Charlie promises, "whoever hurt you will pay". This is a loaded statement, because she is in fact, the perpetrator of Lacy's biggest hurt – being abandoned – and she continues to pay throughout the whole script.

Charlie constantly wrestles with her fear, primarily of failing as a mother. This fear is compounded when nothing she seems to do it is right or rewarded. But that is her problem. For every action there is a consequence. But she does not get to determine the consequence and this is where she constantly falls down. She cannot control the actions or emotions of her mother or her daughter or anyone else, no matter how much she tries

and when she sees them not responding in the way she expects, she perceives this as “her” failure.

Charlie puts considerable effort into making things “right” for Lacy, and fails at every turn, because in fact, she is doing it for herself not for Lacy. Nana Jeanie on the other hand is quite passive in her dealings with Lacy, fearing if she disagrees with Lacy she will lose her too, like she perceives to have lost Charlie.

Charlie too, must change the way she does things or end up losing her daughter and her mother. She is an extremely flawed character with something to learn, which gives room for emotion growth.

What are the challenges you have found? Which aspects of your research question, topic or issue have been difficult to explore?

There were many challenges that arose when applying the research question to the screenplay, *Sins of the Mother*, but the biggest was applying the question to an ever changing script.

Having the power to change the script is not necessarily a good thing when trying to write a research paper on it. Character arc can change at a whim.

The fundamentals stay the same however the breadth and depth of the character arcs fluctuate, depending on what is added or taken away from the script but the more

I delved into the research question, I was forced to go back to the script and make changes as to what I continued to learn about character and conflict. This is because I am the creator of the research paper, it is not someone else's work and it not based wholly on a formula. The story/script was created and then I had to identify the paradigms by which my script fitted into.

Discuss conclusions and critically reflect on and evaluate the significance of the research.

Screenplay writers are given general rules of thumb as to what makes a great screenplay. There are hundreds if not thousands of books written about screenplays and that would suggest to me that there should be a corresponding number of truly successful films. But there are not.

One of the earliest books on screenplay writing was by Anita Loos and John Emerson. “How to Write Photoplays” (1923) encouraged writers not to be discouraged by naysayers who lament at the number of rejected manuscripts yearly.

Instead they encouraged writers to consider writing as a lucrative and practical profession. Although they gave little in the way of “tools”, what they did was encourage those who were interested to read the trades and, most importantly, see films. ¹⁰

¹⁰ <http://thescriptlab.com/feature/category/screenwriting-101/3147-the-history-of-the-screenplay>

It does not matter how much I read, listen to lectures, do workshops, watch films, I am always drawn to character and what makes the character real. Conflict of course is foundation of a story. Making my character real and having her overcome loss, trauma, abuse, violence, something so fierce that we are sure she will not survive it, is my goal. Not only making her go through hell, but having her come out the other end, having grown as a person and achieving her goal. In poring over my screenplay, I found myself always referring back to the basics.

“A hero who wants something takes action but meets conflict which leads to a climax and finally a resolution” (Cowgill, L). ¹¹

4. Key points learnt from exploring my research_question through this screenplay. How my personal understanding of relationship to this research changed since I began the screenplay?

The key points I have learnt are the importance of inner conflict and back story in creating not only character but characters’ characteristics and fundamental roles in the story. Every choice that the protagonist makes needs to have an outcome.

The choices can be good or bad, and it’s these choices that the protagonist acts upon that give us her character.

Charlie makes bad choices, over and over again. So when she stops to think about her

¹¹ (Cowgill, Linda, Starting Out: What’s it all about.1997, pg3)

choices, and makes the right ones, people act differently toward her.

She still falls in Act 3 and although the biggest choice she makes (to get drugs and get wasted) gets thwarted by her friend, once straight and over the initial shock, she makes the right choice and that's to find and seek forgiveness from her mother. The next obstacle is that she cannot find her. Rather she calls on her biggest support, Aqua, to help her find Lacy, who is at this point in the screenplay (end of Act 3), in imminent danger. Charlie realises her shock revaluation (she is the product of rape) will have to wait. She needs to get back to the task at hand, to prove that she can be a good mother and to protect Lacy.

Introducing characters to conflict forces them to grow, and growth can either be positive or negative. They also require massive flaws in order to make them interesting... the possibility of moral transformation is a must and this was a fundamental change from when I first started writing my screenplay.

Initially Charlie was one dimensional with external arcs but very little change internally.

The difference between growth and change became clearer to me when I read the quote.

“Knowledge is Growth but acting on the knowledge is Change”¹²

¹² <http://thescriptlab.com/screenwriting-101/screenwriting/script-tips/642-character-arc-growth-vs-change>

Charlie becomes aware of Lacy's pregnancy by the rapist. She has the knowledge but she doesn't know how to change. Her reaction is one that was expected of her character but when she finds out she was the product of rape, she does two things that show significant character arc. She uses the information to get a lawyer and she keeps the secret around her conception from her mother and daughter, presuming this information will destroy them.

This is one of the instances I put pressure on her to do the right thing, and in doing this, she not only grows through the film, but she changes.

Charlie's internal conflict drives the plot. Michael Hauge sums it up beautifully.

"Hauge describes the longing as the desire the character is aware of, wishes for, and could change if they actually acted, but they never do. The need is the thing that will make their life better, but they don't know they need it yet. They can't identify what's "missing" though they know something is and that makes them unhappy. ¹³"

Charlie has a clear goal: the longing or need to be a good mother and good daughter, but the final realisation is that what she wants from her mother and her daughter, is what she needs to give to herself.

¹³ <http://blog.janicehardy.com/2012/08/the-inner-struggle-guides-for-using.html>

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