

# Feelers

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# **2016: A Character Journey**

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## ABSTRACT

It has always been standard practice for protagonists in screenplays to develop over the course of the story. The character development is even more significant in character arc centred stories, in which the protagonist is expected to complete some form of transformation by the end of the final act. This is especially true in coming-of-age stories, and more recently in minimalist science fiction screenplays which often use science fiction elements as a platform to explore the protagonist's inner conflict.

My exegesis is an examination of the character arc centred screenplay, specifically focusing on the structure of character driven stories. The research will be an investigation of how the action and relationship lines in a screenplay are constructed to emphasise the character arc line. I have written a science fiction drama screenplay, *Feelers*, to explore this research topic.

*Feelers* follows the story of Blake, a young woman who is unwilling to let go of her clearly uncommitted boyfriend. In a desperate attempt to earn enough money to join him overseas, Blake takes a job as a Feeler, absorbing the emotions of a middle aged housewife. Blake soon develops romantic feelings towards her employer's husband, Greg, and finds herself on the familiar path to codependency.

The exegesis reports on: the difficulty of preventing Blake and Greg's relationship from stealing the focus of the screenplay, the classic coming-of-age story techniques I used to illustrate the protagonist's transformation, and the danger of commencing the writing process with an ambiguous character arc.

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## ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Georgina Bloomfield



24 / 04 / 2016  
Date

## **2016: A Character Journey**

Emphasizing the character arc line.

To provide a thorough examination of the creative work and the research undertaken, I will commence my analysis at the conception of the subject matter. After delineating my research topic, I will provide examples of produced films which have implemented the subject of my investigation. Following this, I will discuss my motivations for the focus of my attention before clarifying its significance in this particular screenplay and its artistic appeal to me as a writer. This will lead to the ways in which the research topic has been explored in my submitted creative work and how its impact on my screenplay has evolved throughout the various stages of creative development. Finally I will explore the challenges I have faced within my research and the ways in which my screenplay has been an effective foundation for my investigation, before concluding and evaluating the significance of my research.

*Feelers* focuses on the character arc line of the protagonist, Blake. Blake is a young woman with a fear of being alone and a tendency to overcommit to relationships in an effort to avoid this. As the story starts, Blake soon discovers that her boyfriend, Kyle, abandoned their plans to move overseas together, and left the country alone without any warning. Undeterred by the advice of her friends, Blake remains loyal to Kyle and searches for a better paying job in an effort to earn enough money to join him, leading her to the prospect of becoming a Feeler. Feelers are organic alternatives to antidepressants, absorbing an agreed percentage of their host's emotions through neurotransmitters. Blake promptly wins the role of Feeler for a grief-stricken housewife, Louisa, struggling to overcome the death of her son, Elliot.

Blake moves onto Louisa's property to fulfill her job as a live-in Feeler, soon realizing that the extent of Louisa's grief is more powerful than Blake could have imagined. Moreover, Blake discovers that Louisa's marriage with her doting husband, Greg, is on the rocks with Louisa unfairly blaming Greg for Elliot's death in a car crash. As Louisa's newly dispassionate persona drives her further from the woman she once was, creating a larger rift between her and Greg, Blake finds herself bonding with Greg over their shared burden of Elliot's death. Her care for Greg quickly blossoms into romantic feelings, challenging Blake's loyalty and priorities as she tries to juggle Louisa's resentment of Greg, her own attraction to him and her devotion to her distant boyfriend.

In character arc focused stories, the relationship and action lines are specifically constructed to challenge the inner conflict of the protagonist and emphasize the character arc line. In *Feelers*, both of the subsidiary lines have been manipulated to achieve this in the following four ways: Firstly, the central relationship between the protagonist, Blake, and antagonist, Greg, evolves into a physical manifestation of Blake's inner conflict, her propensity to become codependent, despite any emotional harm it may cause her, to combat her fear of loneliness. Secondly, the action line forces her to eventually confront her conflict. In addition, the action line leads Blake into a situation that reflects an extreme consequence of her issue if left unresolved, giving her a glimpse of her own potential future. Furthermore, both the action and relationship lines heighten the stakes for Blake's inner conflict, adding pressure and presenting additional consequences for her actions.

Similar structural choices can be seen in films *Another Earth* written by Mike Cahill and Brit Marling (2011), *Birdman* written by Alejandro Iñárritu, Nicolás Glacobone, Alexander

Dinelaris and Armando Bo (2014) and *Frances Ha* by Noah Baumbach and Greta Gerwig (2012). In each of these films, the character development is the focus of the story and the other lines serve to realise this. *Another Earth* follows the story of a young woman, Rhoda, who was responsible for the deaths of a child and his mother in a drink driving accident. After serving jail time, Rhoda seeks out the husband of the deceased with the intention of apologising. After seeing the depth of his depression, Rhoda initiates a relationship with the widower, first as his cleaner and later blooming into a love interest. Simultaneously, she pursues an application to visit a duplicate Earth which appeared in the solar system on the night of the car accident. Rhoda's character is consumed with guilt and needs redemption. Both of the other lines provide alternative solutions for her conflict. The action line offers the option of running away and the relationship line gives the opportunity of seeking forgiveness.

Rhoda's relationships also offer a reflection of different outcomes, depending on whether she resolves her inner conflict or not. The janitor at the school Rhoda works at is also overcome with guilt, leading him to deafen himself by pouring bleach in his ears, after previously blinding himself the same way, in an effort to avoid dealing with the world and his mistakes. The husband has allowed his depression to rule his life, resulting in him isolating himself, losing his job and refraining from partaking in his passion for music. However, with the help of Rhoda he is able to pull himself out of his misery. On the other hand, Rhoda's younger brother is excelling, getting accepted into college and receiving praise from his parents, a path that Rhoda rejected after the incident. The stakes for Rhoda's redemption are heightened by showing the worst outcome if she doesn't forgive herself, which is ending up like the janitor who is so burdened with guilt that he blinds and deafens himself. This is especially powerful as the intensity of her guilt and refusal to move on makes her a likeable character



that the audience wants to succeed and heal. Also, the dramatic irony brought on by her central relationship with the husband provides a ticking clock. Eventually the husband will have to find out that Rhoda is responsible for the deaths of his family, forcing her to confront her inner conflict and the denial she has been living in and choose whether she will delve further into her guilt, run away or attempt to move on.

Similarly, *Birdman* is focused on an actor's struggle to deal with his has-been status. The action line follows the protagonist, Riggan, as he endeavours to direct and act in his first Broadway play. As the story begins, Riggan's opinion of himself is drawn directly from how critics and his creative peers view him as an artist. Therefore, the critical success of the play will determine Riggan's legacy as an artist, raising the stakes because if his character doesn't develop, and the play fails, he will be in a worse place than he currently is. This is especially daunting as the physical manifestation of his aggressive alter ego, Birdman, has shown how much self doubt and loathing Riggan currently possesses.

Again, the relationship lines reflect pathways the protagonist might take if their character arc line is not fulfilled. One option is to fail in the eyes of society, like his daughter Sam, and to struggle with finding a purpose. The other, is to succeed in the creative world, like his lead actor Jake, who is still completely miserable. His relationships with each of them illustrate his progress in his character development. The more effort he puts into his relationship with Jake, idolizing and pleasing him, the further he is from letting go of his obsession with gaining the respect of the creative world. However, the better his relationship is with Sam, the closer he is to realising the value of family and finding fulfilment in means other than professional success.

In *Frances Ha*, the protagonist, Frances, grapples with independence, responsibility and all that growing up brings. Frances' action line has her stumbling around New York City, trying to make it as a professional dancer and, more often than not, scrape together enough money to pay rent. Her financial instability and lack of professional success mirrors the development of her character arc line, delving further into the denial that everything will work out if everything stays exactly the same. Eventually, Frances regresses and returns to her old college for a summer job as a Residential Assistant. The action line taking her back to university was imperative for her character arc line to progress as it offered an opportunity for her to reflect on the past and realise change is inevitable.

Likewise, her relationship line forces her character arc line to develop. The central relationship between Frances and her best friend Sophie turns sour after Sophie's more lucrative financial situation leads her to move out of their joint flat and move into a wealthier neighbourhood. Feelings of abandonment result in Frances acting aggressively towards Sophie, creating a larger rift in their relationship. Their deteriorating friendship thrusts Frances into a variety of temporary, fill-in relationships, ultimately leaving her isolated. It is in this space, at her old college and without any friends, that Frances has no choice but to confront the fact that she is an adult and needs to take control of her life instead of waiting for it to come to her. Even after Sophie makes a surprise appearance at the college and they finally redeem their relationship, Sophie leaves in the morning to meet her Fiance. And after that, Frances accept this and grows.

My motivations for addressing a topic on character-driven structures were largely based on my own inclination to begin writing stories with a bigger picture mindset as opposed to being drawn to smaller details. Also, as an audience member, I find myself most attracted to films and stories in which the protagonist encounters a significant transformation by the end of the narrative. Whilst I thoroughly enjoy stories focused on any of the three lines, I have found that the connection I feel when a protagonist discovers an emotional truth, and it changes the way they move forward or look at the world, is second to none. Additionally, I believe that the stories focused on the inner conflict line are emotionally educational in a way that academic education systems do not offer. Specifically, the fact that they relate to people shows that everything we experience is something another human is very likely to have gone through, and that we can find solidarity in the fact that we are all human, we all make mistakes and we all feel certain things. As Buck (1988) says “The emotional themes offered in literature, theatre and film stimulate human curiosity and thus contribute to our emotional education.”. I believe this is a crucial element of all art forms and I wanted to explore the way I can use the action and relationship lines to maximise the connection to audiences that character arc focused stories provide, as well as explore my attraction to character driven films while accommodating to my preferences as a writer.

As a writer I have found that my strengths lie in creating premises and plots. As a result, my feedback in the past has been that my characters tend to be shallow and cartoonish. They often could be referred to as ‘goodies’ and ‘baddies’ and had a tendency to be difficult to empathise with. As screenplays are often referred to as blueprints for a film, as opposed to being a standalone piece of literature, it is essential to write interesting, three-dimensional characters. Like David Howard (2010) says in *How to Build a Great Screenplay: A Master*

*Class in Storytelling for Film*, “Two dimensional or stillborn characters will nearly negate the wonderful traits your actors may bring to the story.” (p.203). Therefore, I wanted to take the opportunity to scrutinize my protagonist and focus on carefully constructing her character arc line to develop my own writing skills and create characters that were easier for an audience to empathise with. I saw this research topic as a challenge and an aspect of writing which I had not yet investigated in detail.

Using the action and relationship lines to fully realise the inner conflict of my protagonist was essential to this particular screenplay for many reasons, one of which is the genre I was working in. *Feelers* belongs to the emerging ‘Low-fi Sci-fi’ genre, a recent stream of low budget, science fiction stories. These differ from other science fiction screenplays as low fidelity stories use science fiction concepts as a platform to explore human dramas with minimal science fiction elements, as opposed to being effects based stories. Other films in this genre are *Never Let Me Go* written by Alex Garland (2010), *I Origins* by Mike Cahill (2014) and *Sound Of My Voice* by Zal Batmanglij (2011). As my story also belongs in this minimalist science fiction movement, the story needed to primarily focus on a line which was not the physical science fiction element. Instead, the action line follows the science fiction aspect, allowing it to assist and provoke Blake’s character arc line without fully depending on it.

Additionally, throughout feedback sessions and the different stages of writing, Blake’s character arc line continually proved to be the most interesting aspect of the story to my peers. After explaining the science fiction premise, the idea of a young woman absorbing the emotions of a depressed, middle aged housewife, the question that my peers continually

asked was how a woman in her early twenties would cope with this. Also, as a writer, I am very aware of the ideas that I am entering into the industry. In a story which explores a metaphor for the common use of medication to treat emotional stress, I wanted to ensure that what the protagonist endures, makes her stronger. The lesson that I wanted the audience to take away from the film, was the same one that the protagonist learnt herself through the development of her character arc line, that walking away from a bad situation, even if it means leaving someone you love, can be the best thing to do.

Finally, the focus on the character arc line was an integral element of this screenplay because to justify the protagonist taking the steps towards the science fiction element, she had to be in a place of desperation. As a female, I have seen several stories of tragic female characters who are incapable of healing themselves and rely on external events or other people to do so, if their situation is resolved at all. As Lucy Hay (2013) discussed in her book *Writing and Selling Thriller Screenplays*, “The silver screen is particularly guilty of recycling tired and offensive tropes of how society sees women and their ‘place’”. (p.131). Quite simply, I wanted to tell a story about a real, female character who somehow found herself as a negative stereotype and, by the end of her character arc line, managed to pull herself out of it, without a man lending her a hand. Her independence is a key trait in the development of her character arc line. Therefore, the action and relationship lines must emphasise her inner conflict, rather than overshadow it.

The topic of using the action and relationship lines to supplement the character arc line is explored in *Feelers* by reflecting the extremes of the protagonist’s inner conflict within her

relationships. The protagonist's approach to relationships with males is repetitive, outlining the fact that her inner conflict is directly related to the men in her life. There is also a balance of the number of scenes spent on beats in the relationship and action lines, drawing emphasis to the third line, the character arc. Moreover, the action line leads Blake into a situation that mirrors her inner conflict and forces changes in the relationship line and consequently the character arc line.

The original synopsis for *Feelers* had Blake pegged as a sufferer of a motor neuron disease, desperately seeking ten thousand dollars to secure a consultation with a top muscle recovery specialist. She also needed a further fifty thousand dollars for the necessary surgery, leading her to assist an old friend with a robbery attempt. The robbery went wrong after the shop owner revealed a gun, shooting at Blake's friend and accidentally hitting an innocent bystander, a teenager called Elliot. Blake, consumed by guilt, stalked Elliot's family and jumped on the opportunity to redeem herself when she discovered that Elliot's mother, Louisa, was in search of a Feeler. Louisa and Greg also had another son, Harry, whom Blake developed a close bond with and Blake's relationship with Greg was much more physically intimate as they became involved sexually. The story ended with Louisa and Greg learning of Blake's part in their son's death and Louisa becoming seriously injured in a car crash. Blake donated her funds and specialist appointment to Louisa, turned herself into the police and accepted her jail punishment with the satisfaction of doing the right thing.

A major change implemented into my first step outline after revising my synopsis, was the omission of several characters and consequently key relationships. Furthermore, I continued to cut out my entire first act and began my step outline with what had previously been the

beginning of my second act. I also created a different ending to the film and removed the core element of the protagonist's life threatening disease. I executed these major plot changes to focus the story on the protagonist's inner conflict, as the character arc line was lost amongst all of the competing relationship and action lines in the synopsis.

Throughout the analysis of my synopsis, it was made clear that several of the relationship lines were unnecessary and did not serve the story. I decided to completely eliminate these surplus characters and relationship lines, in an effort to spend more time on the key relationship lines that emphasise the character arc line. In his book, *Screen Adaptation: A Scriptwriting Handbook*, Kenneth Portnoy (2012) discussed the benefits of eliminating characters in the book to film adaptation of *Leaving Las Vegas* by Mike Figgis (1995).

*With the emphasis in the movie switched to Ben, several of the characters that surround Sera are eliminated. [...] this detailed development of the subplot characters that surround Sera is unnecessary with the focus of the story centred on Ben. (p.136).*

In *Feelers*, I found that multiple characters and relationship lines were similarly unnecessary, drawing focus from Blake. I also found that the extra characters in my synopsis lowered the stakes of relationship line turning points, diminishing the lesson the protagonist could take away from the events and use to further develop her character. Harry provided an alternative for Greg to seek comfort from and endure the grief process with, lessening the importance of Blake's shared understanding. Harry also provided Blake with another outlet, drawing her out of the intensity and major decisions that her triangle with Louisa and Greg provoked.

In between the two different stages, removing the action line of gathering enough money to pay for an operation was imperative. After reviewing the synopsis, it became clear that the action line not only over complicated the story that was already very busy, but also drew

attention away from the farm that Louisa and Greg live on and the dynamics within their triangle. This resulted in the reduction of tension that was built up in the location, offering a connection to the outside world and therefore taking away from the world created in the story. Linda Aronson (2010) states “Identify the essence, heat the idea.” (p.136). By keeping the drama centred on the farm in the second version of the screenplay, the idea was condensed to one location in an attempt to increase suspense and ‘heat the idea’.

The previous action line offered an ultimatum that would lead to an unsatisfactory conclusion of the protagonist’s character arc line, regardless of her choice. As she was suffering from a terminal illness, she is either able to save herself and live in guilt, knowing she chose her life over another’s. Or, she can sacrifice her own life, relieving herself of guilt but also literally letting her guilt kill her. Throughout the analysis stage, I decided that I was much more interested in writing a story about someone who made a big mistake and learnt from it, as opposed to someone who slipped up and no matter how hard she tried, the only way she could earn redemption was through death. Jule Selbo (2014) touches on the topic of creating satisfying endings in her publication *Screenplay: Building Story Through Character*.

*The final truths about the character and the situation revealed after the climax is over need to be satisfying and challenging. A writer should include a sense of future for the protagonist. Not all questions about the protagonist’s new outlook or situation have to be answered, but the audience needs to know that one chapter of the main character’s life has come to some sort of closure, and that he is moving on to another.*  
(p.207)

As there was absolutely no hint of a future for my protagonist, the ending needed to change. The removal of the life threatening disease and adjustment to the ending bore an opportunity



to show Blake's transformation from the beginning of the film whilst creating a more satisfying feeling of resolution.

When progressing onto the revised step outline, the major changes consisted of rearranging the beats, increasing difficulty for the protagonist, clarifying the bigger picture, shifting points-of-view and adding more science fiction elements to the story. The increase in science fiction aspects was largely due to fulfilling the expectations of the audience for the genre of the film. Illuminating the bigger picture of the film, brought the sub-genre of the story to light: a science-fiction / psychological drama. In the synopsis, the story leant more towards a thriller, whilst it was a romance in the first beat-sheet and after further development, has progressed into a psychological drama. This clarification resulted in a more focused story that makes the protagonist's arc and the function of the antagonist, who was Greg at this stage, clearer to the audience.

Between the first and second step outline, the function of the antagonist largely changed from forcing the protagonist to 'do what is right' and leave Greg because he is married, to 'accept the reality of the situation' and realise that Greg will never choose her over Louisa and staying with him will be detrimental to her own emotional health, which closely linked to the core conflict at that stage of development: acceptance versus denial. The concept of denial and illusions were also closely associated with the science fiction aspects of the story, in an effort to build suspense around the *Feelers* centre. The rearranging of the beats similarly contributed to the suspense surrounding the *Feelers* centre and assisted in raising the stakes. The unfamiliar, manipulated environment, along with the strict policies, resulted in the reversal of the Feeler process becoming impossible, unlike in earlier stages of development

where it was an option. As soon as Blake starts absorbing Louisa's emotions, she cannot stop them until the neurotransmitter deactivates in six months time. Therefore, when Blake commits to becoming a Feeler, she has a lot more to lose as she cannot easily change her mind and passes the point of no return, creating a new first act climax. Christina Kallas (2010) quotes Frank Daniel when describing the first turning point in *Creative Screenwriting: Understanding Emotional Structure*.

*Frank Daniel uses the well-known term "the point of no return," that is, the point in time in aviation flight when a plane, due to fuel consumption, is no longer capable of returning to its airfield of origin. After Passing the point of no return, the plane has no option but to continue to some other destination. In this sense, the phrase implies an irrevocable commitment. (p. 81)*

When the Feeler process was reversible, so was Blake's journey into the world of being a Feeler. These changes strengthened the first act climax, giving her no option but to move forward.

Due to the omission of several characters between the synopsis and first beat-sheet, I largely focused on exploring the dynamics between the remaining relationships when revising the beat-sheet. Therefore, in the revised plot outline, there are major shifts in point-of-view, most often between Louisa and Blake. Louisa discovers that Blake was involved in Elliot's death much sooner in the film, and Blake realises that Louisa knows she is having an affair with Greg at an earlier point than in the first beat-sheet. These realisations raise the stakes for Blake as there is a much stronger chance that Greg will discover the truth behind Blake's decision to become a Feeler.

Furthermore, Louisa's knowledge of the affair shows that Blake has underestimated the lengths Louisa will go to, to keep Blake as a Feeler, creating a more dangerous atmosphere for Blake. These increases in dramatic tension made the idea of admitting the truth to Greg much more difficult, putting further obstacles in the protagonist's way. Also, it raised the stakes of maintaining her sexual relationship with Greg, as now she is being blackmailed by Louisa. The changes in Louisa and Blake's relationship line and the raised stakes in the action line force an element of dramatic irony into Blake and Greg's relationship line, similar to in *Another Earth*. Consequently, the audience will know that Greg will eventually find out Blake was involved with Elliot's death, adding to her guilt over Elliot by appending lying to Greg in his most vulnerable state to her conscience. Therefore, the dramatic action to complete her character arc line must be much more significant than what was needed earlier, helping to set up the conclusion of her inner conflict.

The changes between the revised step outline and the first draft of the screenplay were far larger than anticipated. As I began to write the screenplay, I realised that all the ways I had constructed the relationship and action lines to emphasise the character arc line, had actually directed the focus to the relationship line between Greg and Blake. This was irrefutably the centre of the story with all tension building up to how Greg would react when he found out that Blake was responsible for the death of his son. Moreover, whether Greg and Blake would be able to overcome their issues because their love was genuine and whether Louisa and Greg managed to redeem their marriage or whether everyone would end up alone. In an effort to re-focus the story on the character arc line, I made Blake's character an emotionless clone at a classified government cloning facility. Blake escaped the facility at the beginning of the story, stealing a car which she accidentally hit and killed Elliot with before burying his body.

Blake was driven by the idea of becoming a real human, which she attempted to do by signing up to become a Feeler. After observing the media's portrayal of women, her character became sexually charged and obsessed with the idea of eloping with Greg, who happened to look like a lumberjack model who had walked straight off a billboard.

These major character alterations to the relationship and action line opened up an opportunity to explore and draw focus to Blake's character arc line. However, I was ultimately telling two stories, one following an escaped clone trying to understand what being a female human means in our current society, and the other a story about how a young woman copes when thrown into the middle of a sinking marriage, wrecked by the recent death of their son. Also, the idea that Blake just happened to be placed as a Feeler in the home of the parents whose son she killed was an unbelievable coincidence.

When approaching the second draft of the screenplay, I began by taking the advice of Syd Field (2008) from *The Screenwriter's Workbook*: "If you're unclear about the character's change, take the time to write an essay in a page or so, charting his or her emotional arc." (p.90) . After doing so, I decided on the lesson I wanted my protagonist to have learnt by the end of the story; that it's all right to be alone. In addition, that sometimes walking away is the right thing to do and there may be more important things than the love between a couple. And this was going to be shown by Blake deciding to leave Greg, despite the fact that he might be her first, and potentially only, genuine love. Using the clarity of how the character arc line was going to end, I worked backwards and built the story around this. One of the results was the addition of Kyle, Blake's boyfriend at the beginning of the story, whom she endeavours to join overseas by earning money through the Feeler program. The introduction of Kyle,

along with Greg's character not being established until the second act, shows that Blake's feelings towards Greg are a recurring problem, as opposed to specifically arising after meeting Greg, using the relationship line to emphasise her character arc line.

Forming the action line in the second draft was also instrumental in the full realisation of the character arc line. I attempted to do this by giving the protagonist an action line which would provide an ultimatum. She could either choose to succeed in her goal of earning enough money to join her boyfriend, what she has been working towards in her action line. She could decide to pursue Greg despite him being in a time of mourning after his recent loss and pursue her relationship line. Or, she can decide to progress her character arc line and focus on herself, reflecting and strengthening herself as an independent woman. Kate Wright (2004) describes the role which I endeavoured to construct Greg to fulfill in *Screenwriting is Storytelling*.

*This new character, who usually reflects the theme, assists the protagonist in making the difficult moral choice within the story, which the audience hopes is to accept the difficult path presented by the mission. This decision forces the protagonist to overcome internal conflict, embrace the difficult moral conflict, accept the goal or mission of the story, and enter the world where the story takes place. (p.136).*

Blake's desperation in the actions she took and the gravity of her feelings for Greg made the moral decision much more difficult, thus adding significance to her final dramatic action of just walking away, the last beat in her character arc line.

I also intentionally surrounded Blake with people who represent a different choice because of the similarities between character arc driven films and coming-of-age films. In both the structural style and the genre, the character learns something significant at the end of the

story, gaining knowledge and moving forward with their newfound understandings. In her text *The 21st Century Screenplay: A Comprehensive Guide to Writing Tomorrow's Films*, Linda Aronson (2010) comments on the use of other characters to project potential choices for the protagonist.

*Charles Harris feels that the child figure in many coming-of-age films is surrounded by adults, most or all of whom are deeply flawed, and each of whom represents a different choice. The child figure can either choose to become like one of these adults, or to become something different, and the journey will usually involve the child figure realising the inadequacy of a number of characters and lifestyles. (p.162)*

In *Feelers* every pair of characters in the story offer two different paths that Blake can follow. In the beginning of the screenplay, one of her flatmates is confident, independent and enthusiastically promotes the idea of abandoning her relationship with Kyle. On the other hand, Blake's other flatmate is quiet, reserved and believes Blake should continue to pursue her relationship. Similarly, Louisa shows what will happen if Blake avoids her feelings instead of confronting them and Greg's pain is a reflection of what Blake may experience if she holds onto relationships even when they pass the threshold of being detrimental to her emotional health. All of these potential outcomes are deeply flawed, leading Blake to have to grow and become something different.

I continued to use aspects of the coming-of-age genre when constructing the relationship lines to support the character arc line. As Linda Aronson (2010) also said "Those with multiple adult role models are really multiple antagonist films..." (p.162). This is a technique that I endeavoured to achieve in my second screenplay. The intention was that if there was not one specific antagonist, the focus of the story would not be stolen by that particular relationship. This would emphasize the idea that the story is character arc driven as opposed

to being centred on the relationship line, as it did in previous drafts. I also tried to contribute to writing a multiple antagonist story by actively cutting down the number of scenes that Blake shared with Greg, creating a more equal balance of the beats shared with Louisa and by herself.

This screenplay has irrefutably proven to be an effective way to explore my research aim. The different stages of development before writing the revised second draft allowed me to fully explore the topic in several different story situations. Although the science fiction premise and character names have remained the same since the first synopsis, every other aspect of the story has changed monumentally. The setting of the story itself started in a city before moving to the mountains, then to a private gated community near a secret cloning facility, before finally ending up in the country in the second draft. This experimentation, more than anything, showed me that the clarity of a character arc is not improved by changing significant aspects of the story or adding in more elements, but rather by simplifying the story to what I actually want to say as a writer, and making all of the other lines work around it.

When analysing the early stages of development for this screenplay, I found that the relationship line was quite strong and had a tendency to pull focus with most of my feedback revolving around Greg and Blake. This was another element which contributed to the effectiveness of this screenplay when exploring my research topic. As I already had another line which had taken over the role as focal point of the story, it provided a challenge of reconstructing it to take a supporting role to the character arc line. In the first draft of the screenplay I was still unsuccessful in achieving this and had to take each line apart and

consciously fabricate every beat to support the character arc line. I also explored Linda Aronson's (2010) techniques to approaching the coming-of-age genre and incorporated the lessons which highlighted the development of the protagonist.

I encountered several challenges when exploring my research topic, namely when forming the relationship line. As I progressed through each stage of development, I found that as a writer, I found the relationship between Greg and Blake more interesting than Blake's character arc line. It was very difficult grappling with the idea of sacrificing my natural tendency to focus on the relationship line to properly explore the research topic in the screenplay, however it was necessary. This discovery was a personal finding, leading me to further specify my preferences as a writer for future works.

I also found it increasingly difficult to define when a single line became the focus of the story. In my research, I watched a large quantity of films that were similar in genre and/or with the character's inner conflict used as the focal point of the story. Although they varied in intensity, I found the relationship and action lines hugely prominent in all of the films I was watching, and in my own screenplay that I was writing. This led to an overestimation of the amount of focus needed on the character arc line, for it to take priority in the story. It wasn't until I watched a very different film, *Spotlight* directed by Tom McCarthy, which has very little character development and is absolutely focused on the action line, that I realised my story was not in danger of the action line taking over the prime focus. Compared to action line driven films such as *Spotlight*, my screenplay is irrefutably focused on the character arc line, rather than the action line. This is also led me to consider how I was going to measure the success of using the other two lines to emphasise the character arc line. I decided that



whilst reading, it would depend on which of the following questions I asked myself; ‘What is going to happen?’, ‘Are Blake and Greg going to end up together?’ or, ideally, ‘What is Blake going to do?’.

Another challenge that I faced, was actually clarifying what the character arc line was for my protagonist. After I omitted the idea of Blake being physically responsible for Elliot’s death and consequently losing her need for redemption, her inner conflict became lost within subsequent development. When I began writing the second draft, I wanted the character arc line to reflect Blake learning to empathise after initially being a very reserved, emotionally unavailable person. I initially thought that the ambiguity of her character arc line was a matter of the other two lines overpowering her inner journey. It took me a long time to realise that the problem was that I had written Blake was always very empathetic from the start of the first act, despite her being reserved, and that I had not written her an arc at all. Jack Epps, Jr. (2016) discussed the issue with unclear character arcs in *Screenwriting is Rewriting: The Art and Craft of Professional Revision*.

*It is virtually impossible to write a focused screenplay, or take your character development to the next level, if you do not know your main character’s emotional issue. During your rewrite, you must use the main character’s internal story to unify your screenplay. Virtually everything revolves around it.’ (p. 78).*

This discovery led me to realise that the other two lines were not actually obstructing the success of writing a story that revolves around the character arc line. At this point I reconsidered the research topic and recognised that I had been aiming to use the other lines to fully realise the character arc line as opposed to emphasise it, as I set out to in the first place.

The key thing I have learnt from exploring my research topic is the importance of knowing exactly what it is that I plan to centre the story around. I faced a lot of challenges in my efforts to make the character arc line the focus of the story. It wasn't until the later stages of development, when I was beginning to write my second draft, that I realised my problem was very little to do with the other two lines, and more to do with my own ambivalence about what I was trying to say. Syd Field (2008) also refers to the issue I experienced of having an unclear character arc line in his publication *The Definitive Guide To Screenwriting*.

*If you don't know the basic and essential elements of your story line, or if you're vague and unclear about the progression of events, or the character's arc, this lack of information, this lack of preparation will often create problems in the screenplay [...] This is your responsibility as a writer; if you don't know what's going on in your story, then who does? (p.155)*

After endeavouring to rectify the cloudiness of the protagonist's inner conflict, I found it a lot easier to construct the other lines to enhance character arc.

A further lesson from my research that I greatly value is how to use the action and relationship lines to mirror the protagonist's inner conflict. After redefining my protagonist's character arc line, this was instrumental in continuing to explore my thesis and using the other two lines to benefit the inner conflict. Another key learning was to make a conscious effort to balance out the beats in each of the lines, giving priority to the character arc line. The combination of assigning the majority of beats to the character arc line and using a large portion of the remainder of the beats to reflect the same struggle the protagonist was enduring, undeniably illuminated the character arc line as the focus of the story.

I think that I was semi-successful in my achievement of actively using the inferior two lines to emphasise the focus of the story. My sudden discovery that I was failing to write a character arc line with an actual arc in it, and that I wasn't totally sure of what I was trying to say as a writer, came very late in the development process. As a result, I spent the earlier stages trying to construct action and relationship lines to support a flawed character arc line, and the time after was used to rectify this mistake. After finishing my revised second draft of the screenplay, I believe that I accomplished writing a story that was focused on the character arc line. The question I found myself asking when rereading the screenplay was 'What is Blake going to do?' and that is how I decided to measure my achievement. However, I do believe that I also could have constructed the other lines to better enhance the inner conflict, if I had of gone through this learning process earlier in development.

In later drafts I would explore this to a greater extent by further experimenting with the relationship and action lines in more original ways. My relationship lines were crafted closely on my inspection of coming-of-age films because of their similarity to character arc driven stories. Although this definitely helped, Linda Aronson (2010) also mentions "You are in well-trodden territory, so avoid cliches and sentimentality." (p.162). I do not believe that I successfully avoided the cliches that belong to the structure or the basic story premise of an outsider entering a household with a married couple, and would like to further develop the story after finally settling on a clear inner conflict for my protagonist.

I strongly believe that relationship and action lines contribute to the enhancement of the character arc line in inner conflict driven stories. I also think that the same is true of the inferior two lines for action or relationship centred stories. However, as mentioned before, I

believe that the key to achieving this is by having full clarity and confidence in what the focus of the story is, from the point it commences to its conclusion.

With this being my major learning from my research, I found that my personal relationship with my thesis as wholly changed. When beginning the research project, I was under the impression that stories that attempted to focus on the protagonist's inner journey and failed were at fault because the action and/or relationship lines were irrelevant to the character's inner conflict. While this may be true in some stories, my exploration of the topic has led me to believe that the problem lies in beginning a story without a definite arc in mind, leading the more defined lines to steal attention. As soon as I realised this, I immediately had no doubt that the other two lines were able to enhance and challenge the third. If I was to commence research on the subject matter now, I would be focusing my investigation on maintaining originality when constructing action and relationship lines to enhance the character arc line. However, I have learnt methods of how to formulate the action and relationship lines to emphasize the inner conflict and, more importantly, I have singled out the major challenges and obstacles I faced in this process. As a result, I feel more confident in approaching future screenplays, locating major story problems earlier in the development process and getting the most out of the development stages.

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