

How to Kill a Protagonist (blog)

Today we are going to look at how to kill a protagonist. For those of you who don't know what a protagonist is, it is the main good guy in a text. A great story writer can make you want the main character to die. In lots of stories main characters die, yet their deaths are usually preventable, pointless or pathetic. To show this we're gonna explore the endings of The Crucible, The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas, Romeo and Juliet, Othello, Titanic and Gladiator.

The Crucible by Nicholas Hytner is a good example of how NOT to kill a protagonist. The film follows John Proctor and his mistake of having an affair with the delusional Abigail Williams. After his affair John realises his mistake and turns Abigail's advances down. This, dear reader, is the beginning of Abigail's mental downfall. Throughout the remainder of the film Abigail accuses people in Salem of witchcraft, and they are sentenced to death if they do not confess. Hytner shows Abigail losing her sanity throughout the film and by the end she is completely insane. She seems to have lost all ability to tell her lies from the truth, and almost seems to believe her own accusations. Ultimately, she accuses John Proctor, steals her uncle's money then flees after begging John to go with her. He, however refuses her yet again. Instead he does not lie and say he is a witch to save his life, and dies along with two other people also accused of witchcraft. Hytner cuts off John Proctor mid sentence, just as he was about to say 'amen'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzIZ1fBUvY> The ending leaves you feeling incomplete and frustrated. Because of the delusions of a young girl, many innocent people died. This ending is pointless and preventable and ruined the entire film.

I'm sure everybody has seen the film, The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas, and if you haven't, where have you been all your life? Basically, it is a movie about a young German boy named Bruno who has no friends, and finds an unlikely friend in a small Jewish boy named Shmuel, who lives in a Nazi concentration camp near his house. The film ends with Bruno crossing through the barbed wire fence that has separated the boys throughout the film and them being pushed into a gas chamber where they ultimately die. The final scene shows Bruno's parents realising he is gone and a picture of a plain, black, door. <https://i.stack.imgur.com/9ocJH.png> The whole movie builds up to their deaths which are preventable and pointless. The ending gives no closure, it just leaves you feeling sad and incomplete.

You don't even need to watch Romeo and Juliet to understand how frustrating the ending is. Two teenagers from opposing families fall in love. One pretends to die, (Juliet) so they can be together, the other is heartbroken and kills himself, (Romeo) next to her body. She then wakes up, finds him dead, and then kills herself. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcSwBHs1uD4&t=11s> The ending is so frustrating because it is so easy to avoid. It is so pathetic that the whole movie seems irrelevant, you're basically waiting for them to die. She could have just told him her plan, then the whole ending would be

completely different. Their deaths are pointless, pathetic, and without a doubt preventable. I mean seriously, she could have stopped him, but no, she just opened her eyes and did nothing until it was too late.

If you have no idea what this movie is, don't worry neither did I until this year. And yes it is another Shakespeare story. Okay, Othello directed by Oliver Parker, let's talk about how this ending is odious as well. Othello is a black male who is the general in the army of Venice. His colour is kind of important cause everyone else in the film is white. He marries the daughter (Desdemona) of a Venetian senator. Othello appoints Cassio as his lieutenant and this enrages Iago who was also up for the position. The remainder of the film follows Iago as he seeks revenge on Othello for not appointing him as his lieutenant. As a way of engaging the audience, Parker adds scenes of Iago breaking the 4th wall and talking directly to them. Throughout the movie we understand Iago's plan; he is going to ruin Othello's marriage by planting a seed of doubt in his mind. Iago convinces Othello his wife is cheating on him until he can no longer take his doubt and kills her in a fit of rage. After realising what he had done, Othello kills himself next to her dead body. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqjrHYdMvjo> This whole ending is stupid because Othello didn't believe he was good enough for Desdemona even though at the beginning she went against her father's orders and married him. This is both pathetic and pointless. Desdemona just adds to the pointlessness of it all because she is so blind to her husband's feelings which leads to her own death.

Titanic directed by James Cameron is yet another film that shows us how NOT to kill a protagonist. I haven't even seen the film and I hate the ending. My suggestion? Don't waste three hours of your life. So because I haven't seen it I can't summarise it for you, but I can still roast the ending in all its ludicrous glory. All I know is that it is a love story involving a boy named Jack and a girl named Rose. In the final scene of the two together, Rose is seen lying on a door and Jack is resting on the edge. Just moments before Jack dies, they both confess their love for each other and promise to "never let go". Once Jack is dead, Rose pries his cold dead body off the door and pushes it into the sea. She then leaps off the door and blows the whistle on a life jacket to alert the safety boat of her position. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8MJxxmrWO6s> This ending is both pathetic and preventable. Firstly BOTH ROSE AND JACK COULD HAVE FIT ON THE DOOR, and secondly she could have alerted the rescue boat sooner and saved them both. Even if the door wasn't big enough, they could have just laid very close together. After all, the entire movie is a love story so I don't see a problem with that idea.

Now I know so far I have been telling you about all the movies with less than reasonable endings where the protagonist dies. However there is one movie that kills the protagonist, yet isn't terrible. One movie that leaves you feeling content and happy with the film. One movie that makes you want the main character to die. It takes a good storyteller to kill a protagonist, and Gladiator by Ridley Scott, does just that. It follows the life of Maximus, a general in the Roman army under the rule of Marcus Aurelius. After Commodus (Marcus' son) kills his father and attempts to kill Maximus, he kills Maximus' most important possession, his family. After the

death of his family, Maximus loses all will to live, and finds himself in the world of slaves and gladiators. He seeks revenge on Commodus, before he joins his family in the afterlife. He ultimately kills Commodus in a unfair battle to the death. Once he returns power to the senate of Rome, Maximus dies and is reunited with his family in the afterlife, while his physical body is treated as the saviour of Rome. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGSuorglnvw>

Scott makes you want Maximus to die. Without his death the rest of the movie would be irrelevant. THIS, is how to kill a protagonist. Not by cutting them off mid sentence, or playing a game, or watching their lover die then killing themselves, or killing their lover then themselves, or watching their lover die then saving themselves. NO! These endings all have one thing in common, they all ruined the movie, the characters, and our hope for humanity. But there is one story that rises above the rest. One movie where the main character dies for a reason, and where we -as the audience- almost want him to die, Gladiator by Ridley Scott.

Maximus, R.I.P.

Written by:
Amy Hudson

GLADIATOR

To be successful, a text must bring us moments of joy.

(Literary essay)

What makes a text successful? A successful text is one that keeps you engaged, it is memorable, it makes an emotional impact on you. It elicits empathy and keeps you questioning, guessing and anticipating what might happen next. In a sense it does bring us moments of joy, however, joy would be more like triumph and satisfaction. Joy must be more than just 'happiness'. Even the most tragic films can bring us satisfaction or give us a sense of triumph. Gladiator by Ridley Scott is a prime example of a successful text that has little to no moments of happiness. In fact, what makes it good (satisfying to us) are the subtexts and layers of meaning that Scott integrates throughout to allow us, the viewer to deeply connect with Maximus' journey. All include overtones of sadness and loss. This is shown most clearly to us through the exposition and the hints we are given as to how important his family is and what drives his character, then through the death scene of his family and finally through the recurring visual motif of Elysium. Though these aspects are regrettable, they are all effective in the way they draw the viewer in and make us feel Maximus' pain.

Scott uses the exposition to portray Maximus as a character we can admire. He shows him as powerful, yet humble. Without this admiration, we as the viewer would not be able to sympathise with him, essentially we wouldn't care. We wouldn't want to follow him throughout the film. Before the death of Marcus Aurelius, Maximus talked to him about his family and farm, he tells him he has been gone for "2 years 264 days and this morning". This is significant because it shows the viewer how often Maximus thinks of his family and thus how important they are to him. We as the viewer are able to closely connect with him through his family's importance to him, being that we all have a person or people that are important to us in this way. This idea is further reinforced with a close up shot of two figurines that represent Maximus' wife and son. Scott uses these figurines as a visual motif. Through the subtext they seem to mirror what will happen to him next, and allows the viewer to anticipate the outcome of the next scenes. It is successful because it is like we are waiting to see them again, just as Maximus is waiting to see his family again.

When Maximus realises his family is in danger, he pushes himself to his physical limits in an attempt to save them. He gives us even more reason to admire him. Scott makes the viewer empathise with Maximus, even though he didn't make it in time to save them. He does this by cutting together different scenes that show Maximus in different settings and thus how far from his family he really is. Scott connects Maximus to his family

during this scene by showing what is happening to them at the same time. Scott shows Maximus as being weak and tired. He is seen hunched over on his horse, eyes blinking slowly, as blood runs down his arm. The scene cuts to Maximus' family and we see his son get run over by the soldiers' horses. The scene then cuts back to Maximus in the desert as he sits himself up and increases his pace. Scott keeps the viewer engaged by changing between scenes and using the subtext of the spiritual connection Maximus has with his family to give the viewer hope that even if he doesn't get to them in this life, he will see them again in the afterlife. This foreshadowing gives the viewer a sense of hope that Maximus will soon be happy again. This in itself is satisfying, it is the spiritual connection that allows us the viewer to follow Maximus on the remainder of his journey. We still admire the character, we are better able to accept all the misfortunes he faces throughout the film. As ultimately deep down we know at some point he will be reunited with his family.

Scott uses the death scene to further emphasise the idea that Maximus' family is his motivation. He uses a long shot as Maximus runs across his smoking farm. As he gets closer, the shot changes to a medium shot. When he sees his family hanging at his farm, he breaks down uncontrollably and lets all his emotion show, where as initially we see him as strong and courageous, and we do not expect to see this part of him (this emotional side of him). Soon after we see Maximus crying and kissing the feet of his dead wife, we see him lying next to two mounds of dirt. We as the viewer see the connection between the two people hanging and the two mounds of dirt, Maximus has buried his family. Scott successfully uses subtext to indirectly tell the viewer who the people are. He shows this through Maximus' burst of emotion and the juxtaposition seen in the scene before. Throughout the film Maximus picks up dirt and smells it before each battle. We can connect this to him reminding himself of his family and farm. As if in direct contrast to this burst of emotion, throughout the remainder of the film, Maximus seems to show little to no emotion. When Maximus is found by the slave drivers, he does not respond to the touch of a person's hand. We then see him lying on a cart and pictures flash across the screen as if Maximus is seeing things. Near the end of the montage, we see a faded picture of Maximus (which is seen again before his fight with Commodus - at the end of the film) overlapping the statues of his family which he is seen praying with throughout the beginning of the film. This makes the viewer think that Maximus sees his future, and understands it is not yet his time to die. This idea is reinforced with Juba (another slave) talking to Maximus during this scene. He says "You will meet them again, but not yet." This is also an important line because at the end of the film, after Maximus' death, we see Juba burying Maximus' statues in the colosseum, and saying once again, "...I will see you again, but not yet, not yet." Scott reinforces the sense of hope when he uses Juba to say these lines both near the beginning of the film

and at the end. The burying of the statues also gives the viewer a sense of completion because it reminds us (the viewer) of the scene when Maximus buries his family and lies next to the two mounds of dirt. This in a way brings him and his family back together physically, they are together again, just as he wanted all along. The death of Maximus' family and his downfall in society brings no sense of happiness to the viewer. While Scott gives the viewer a sense of completion, it is all bittersweet, Maximus has achieved his goal, and is reunited with his family, but he is dead. As the viewer we always want the main character to live happily ever after, but Gladiator takes this away from us by killing Maximus. We as the viewer understand that it is best for Maximus to die and throughout the film Scott makes it okay for the viewer to accept his death. Without his death none of the rest of the film would have made sense to us. We as the audience need him to die to be satisfied.

The recurring visual motif of Elysium is another way we as the viewer get a sense of satisfaction. The first thing we see when the film begins, is the field of Elysium with a hand running through it. It is shown to be alive and somewhat happier than the following close up of Maximus' face. In direct contrast to the unfiltered field of Elysium, Maximus' face is shown with a blue filter over top making it seem sadder than that of Elysium. The cut of this scene also makes the viewer think that Maximus is seeing the field of Elysium, as if we, the viewer are seeing his thoughts. Throughout the film, Maximus seems to be having visions of Elysium. After the death of his family, Maximus wishes to die, he has lost his status and his family, he has lost everything. Throughout the film, Scott adds cuts and scenes of Elysium. This makes the viewer think that Elysium is always on Maximus' mind, he is always thinking about it and he always wants to be there. Scott uses the recurring visual motif of Elysium to subtly foreshadow Maximus' death. By doing this he helps the viewer accept his death before it even happens. Maximus finds another reason to live when Proximo mentions meeting the emperor, he wants to kill him. After Maximus kills Commodus, he allows himself to finally push open the door of Elysium he had been seeing throughout the film. He lets himself go to his family and the full view of the hand in the wheat field is finally shown. This gives the viewer a sense of completion and almost relief. The scene is finally complete, and Maximus is finally happy, even though we as the viewer have mixed feelings. His death does not bring us happiness, even if it is what he wanted. The film has come to completion and nothing is left to the imagination. Scott successfully closed the film by reuniting Maximus with his family, this reunion however not happy for us as they are reunited in death.

Without the sad ending of Maximus' death, I feel the film would not be as successful. Without it the rest of the film would not make sense. It would feel incomplete. Scott

ultimately killing Maximus bought the viewer a sense of closure. It made sense for him to die. In a sense it put the pieces of the puzzle together. It justified why his family died, why he wanted to die and why he kept seeing Elysium. Saying that Gladiator is not a successful film is wrong. Saying Gladiator brings the viewer happiness, is also wrong. Therefore a film does not have to bring moments of happiness to be successful, sometimes it's the moments of sadness and satisfaction that make a film great. Scott makes the viewer feel for Maximus, he makes us empathise with him. He makes you almost want Maximus to die so he can be happy, so he can be free. Gladiator is bittersweet. Maximus is reunited with his family (as he wanted) but the only way that could be done was for him to die. Which is in no way, shape, or form, happy although it does bring us an agreeable sense of satisfaction.

Amy Hudson

Number AS91475 Version 1 English 3.4

Title Produce a selection of fluent and coherent writing which develops, sustains, and structures ideas

Student name:

Evidence/Judgements for Achievement	Evidence/Judgements for Achievement with Merit	Evidence/Judgements for Achievement with Excellence
<p>The student produces at least two pieces of fluent and coherent writing. Each piece develops, sustains, and structures ideas.</p> <p>This involves demonstrating an understanding of purpose and audience by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> developing ideas and making links between them. This may include the use of narrative, imagery, explanations, analysis, explorations, critique, details, examples, and a range of dimensions or viewpoints selecting and using language features appropriate to each text type to create consistency in meaning and effect and to sustain interest using text conventions accurately (including spelling, 	<p>The student produces at least two pieces of fluent and coherent writing. Each piece develops, sustains, and structures ideas, and both are convincing.</p> <p>This involves demonstrating a discerning understanding of purpose and audience through the discriminating selection, development, and integration of ideas, language features, and structures appropriate to each text type to create consistency in meaning and effect and to sustain interest by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> developing ideas and making links between them. This may include the use of narrative, imagery, explanations, analysis, explorations, critique, details, examples, and a range of dimensions or viewpoints 	<p>The student produces at least two pieces of fluent and coherent writing. Each piece develops, sustains, and structures ideas, and both are convincing and command attention.</p> <p>This involves demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of purpose and audience through the insightful selection, development, and integration of ideas, language features, and structures appropriate to each text to create consistency in meaning and effect, sustain interest, and create a striking whole by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> developing ideas and making links between them. This may include the use of narrative, imagery, explanations, analysis, explorations, critique, details, examples, and a range of dimensions or viewpoints

<p>punctuation, grammar) so the writing contains only minor errors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • selecting effective structure(s). This may include poetic, formal, and narrative forms or a combination of these. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • selecting and using language features appropriate to each text type to create consistency in meaning and effect and to sustain interest • using text conventions accurately (including spelling, punctuation, grammar) so the writing contains only minor errors • selecting effective structure(s). This may include poetic, formal, and narrative forms or a combination of these. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • selecting and using language features appropriate to each text type to create consistency in meaning and effect and to sustain interest • using text conventions accurately (including spelling, punctuation, grammar) so the writing contains only minor errors • selecting effective structures. This may include poetic, formal, and narrative forms or a combination of these.
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Teacher Judgement:

Student has demonstrated good control over conventions expected in both blog writing and literary essay. The blog has a clear structure that sustains a light hearted tone with clever turns of phrase. The purpose is clear and student has specifically chosen an angle that sustains interest by including humour.

The literary essay uses conventions accurately and develops a strong personal voice. It is a convincing piece.

Overall grade: Merit