

## Plotting Your Character's Demise: The Purpose-Driven Death

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### Preparing for Death

Before designing a character's death, it's a useful exercise to write down answers to each of these questions to find the most important aspects of that character you can exploit in their final moment.

- **Traits** – What are their goals, desires, motivations, values, duties? What about their personality? Do they have any problems or flaws? Backstory wounds that left scars?
- **Profession** – What is their job or role in society? Social class? Are they in a position of authority, power, or oppression?
- **Relationships** – What are their most important relationships to others? People they love, hate, protect, want to kill, mentor, apprentice, family, friends?
- **Revelations** – What secrets do they hide? What backstory wounds do they not face? What do they learn? Do they have any revelations that change their world view?
- **Symbols** – What symbols are attached to your character? Are there certain themes you want them to embody?
- **Story Role** – How do they fit in the structure of the plot? Are they a hero, villain, mentor, ally, opponent? Does their role change as the story progresses?

### The Fatal Flaw

*The character makes a fatal mistake that leads to their death, or has a character flaw that is a direct cause of their death because they cannot conquer it. Check out TV Tropes' page on Fatal Flaw for a great list of specific flaws.*

#### **Inspector Javert – *Les Misérables* – Victor Hugo**

Javert has black and white morality and does not abide anyone breaking the law, not even himself. In the end he decides to let the criminal Jean Valjean free, but he cannot live with himself for breaking the law and his moral code, symbolically putting himself in shackles and commits suicide. He is his own judge and executioner.

#### **Dorian Gray – *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – Oscar Wilde**

Dorian's flaw is his obsession for beauty in his hedonistic lifestyle. He wishes his portrait will age instead of him, and the portrait assumes all the ugliness of his soul. In the end, Dorian cannot stand how hideous the portrait has become and destroys it with a knife, which in turn destroys himself. His servants find him, an unrecognizable old man stabbed to death, with the portrait returned to its original beauty.

#### **Ned Stark – *A Game of Thrones* – George R.R. Martin**

Ned values honor over reason. Duty bound, he goes to King's Landing against his will to be the King's Hand. When tries to expose that Joffrey is a child of incest, he is charged for treason and is beheaded. Symbolically, Ned's first scene in the book is a reversal, where he beheads a criminal for defecting and explains to his son how he must uphold the law, a sentiment the Stark children carry through the rest of the story.

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### The Fulfilment of Desire

*A character has a single desire they pursue throughout the entire book, only to fulfil it in an unexpected and often perverted way in their final moment.*

#### **Gollum – *The Return of the King* – J.R.R. Tolkien**

Gollum is consumed with the Ring, his precious, and must have it back at all costs. He spends the story stalking and then deceiving Frodo to steal it back. At Mount Doom, when Gollum finally takes it back, he is so elated that he does not realize he is falling into the lava where the Ring was forged. Ironically, Gollum reclaiming the Ring saves Frodo from the same corruption.

#### **Penny – *Doctor Horrible's Sing Along Blog* – Joss Whedon**

Billy has two conflicting desires: join the Evil League of Evil and have Penny fall in love with him. The League tells him he will need to murder someone before he is accepted, and Billy plans to murder his nemesis Captain Hammer, the dashing superhero that just started dating Penny. But Captain Hammer causes Billy's death ray to explode, instead killing Penny. Billy gets what he's always wanted, joining the Evil League of Evil, but at the cost of killing the girl he loved.

#### **Juliet – *Romeo and Juliet* – William Shakespeare**

Juliet's love for Romeo transcends political boundaries as well as ethereal boundaries like life and death. They stage Juliet's death so they can escape their families and run away together. When she wakes from her sleeping draught to find Romeo dead from poison, she kills herself as the final resort to be with her love eternally as is her heart's greatest desire.

### The Noble Sacrifice

*One character sacrifices themselves to save another, showing just how far they will go to save the other. Often the sacrifice is from a mentor, and often is an act of redemption.*

#### **Dumbledore – *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* – J.K. Rowling**

Here's what's so amazing about Dumbledore's sacrifice. He doesn't die to save Harry. He dies to save Malfoy from becoming a murderer and dark wizard. Dumbledore was cursed and going to die, but asking Snape to kill him in order to save Malfoy's soul is one of the most noble acts Dumbledore ever commits.

#### **Sydney Carton – *A Tale of Two Cities* – Charles Dickens**

Sydney is an apathetic man who is wasted on alcohol and in love with Lucie. But Lucie is devoted to Darnay and she could never marry Sydney. Sydney has always had an uncanny resemblance to Darnay, and has taken the fall for him in the past. In an incredible act of love he takes Darnay's place in the guillotine, a symbolic act of redemption as he envisions a society that can be reborn from his death in the wake of the French Revolution.

#### **Bing Bong – *Inside Out* – Pete Docter and Ronnie del Carmen**

Riley's emotions are personified in her head in *Inside Out*, which follows Joy's quest to remind Riley what makes her happy again after she's moved to a different city and joyful memories of her old home and friends turn to sadness. When Joy falls into the chasm of oblivion where things are forgotten forever, she has one shot at escaping on Riley's imaginary friend Bing Bong's magical wagon. Bing Bong recognizes that his time is done, Riley is too old for imaginary friends, and the two of them are too heavy to boost out. Without telling Joy, he slips off to give her the final boost out, while fading into oblivion as she looks back.

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### The Revelation

*The moment of death for a character reveals a new piece of information, revealing a secret to another character, a twist that will change how we view the story, or a revelation about the nature of humanity.*

#### **Roy – *Blade Runner* – Ridley Scott**

Roy has a profound revelation on the nature of humanity in the end of *Blade Runner* (the 1982 version, at least). Replicants have tragically short life-spans of only four years. Roy recognizes this and is on a fruitless search for more life while fighting against Deckard. But in a sudden moment where he gains empathy, he saves Deckard's life. Reflecting on all the human death he's witnessed, he realizes that all life is fleeting no matter how long or short, and all lives will be lost in time "like tears in rain." Then he calmly accepts his own death. Fun fact, that famous monologue was ad libbed by Rutger Hauer.

#### **Cyrano de Bergerac – *Cyrano de Bergerac* – Edmond Rostand**

Cyrano is a war hero and a poet who fears rejection from the woman he loves, Roxanne, because he thinks himself ugly due to his unusually large nose. He impersonates his handsome friend Christian to write love letters that captures Roxanne's heart. Years later, dying of old age, Cyrano recites one final poem for her just before he dies, revealing it was his poetry that Roxanne fell in love with long ago. His love is requited only in the last moment.

#### **Dr. Malcolm Crowe – *The Sixth Sense* – M. Night Shyamalan**

If you haven't seen this movie, stop reading this now and go watch it. Crowe's death happens in the first scene, but we are lead to believe he survives the gunshot. In one of the greatest twists and reveals in film history, we learn at the end that Crowe is dead and instead of him helping Cole, Cole has been the one trying to help Crowe realize and accept his death.

### The Inciting Incident

*The death of someone close to the hero spurs the hero into action, or causes a major turning point for the hero's journey*

#### **Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru – *A New Hope* – George Lucas**

Luke refuses the call to action (if briefly) and runs home only to find his aunt and uncle murdered by Storm Troopers. This is the final push to follow Obi Wan. Luke has nothing left on Tatooine, and now he has a personal reason to want to stop the Empire.

#### **Thomas Schell – *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* – Jonathan Safran Foer**

Thomas always had a riddle for his 9 year-old, timid son Oskar to solve. After he dies in 9/11, Oskar finds a key in his father's closet. Desperate to solve what he believes is the final riddle his father left him, Oskar sets out into New York. Had his father never died, Oskar would have never pursued this false riddle, and never stepped out of his shell. (Get it? Oskar *Schell*?)

#### **King Hamlet / Mufasa – *Hamlet* / *The Lion King* – Shakespeare / Rob Minkoff and Roger Allers**

This one is pretty simple. King Hamlet died and now Hamlet wants (painfully slow and terribly thought-out) revenge. In the Disney retelling, Simba runs away because he fears he will be blamed for Mufasa's death, and later discovers his uncle (Claudius / Scar) murdered his father.

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### **Rue – *Hunger Games* – Suzanne Collins**

Rue's death is not the inciting incident for the first book, but it might be for the series as a whole. Before Rue, Katniss only wanted to survive. When Rue dies, it is a major turning point for Katniss and for the rest of the world. In this moment, Katniss becomes a revolutionary.

### **The Thematic Death**

*The death contributes to the main theme of the story, which can usually be summarized in a single phrase. Often the fact the character died is more significant than how or why.*

### **Ellie Fredricksen – *Up* – Pete Docter and Bob Peterson**

The thematic phrase here is, "Adventure is out there!" Mr. Fredricksen promised his wife a grand adventure where they would live by the waterfall in the jungle. Instead they grow old together and Ellie passes away. Mr. Fredricksen, consumed with guilt and stuck in his grief, desperately tries to amend his mistake and give his wife the adventure she always wanted, only later to realize that the life he shared with her was the greatest adventure she could have asked for, and now he needs to go off and have his own adventures.

### **Uncle Ben – *The Amazing Spider-Man (Comics)* – Stan Lee and Steve Ditko**

"With great power comes great responsibility." These were Uncle Ben's last words to Peter Parker, and immediately the lesson drives home when Peter forsakes responsibility and blames himself for his uncle's death. Peter's foray into the superhero life is a baptism of fire, and he never forgets.

### **Katsumoto – *The Last Samurai* – Edward Zwick**

Katsumoto is the last Samurai in a rebellion against an Emperor who is succumbing to Western trade and politics. Katsumoto and his village are the last to uphold the ancient Samurai traditions. In the final battle, all Samurai on horseback are slaughtered by a modern machine: a gatling gun. Katsumoto is defeated and commits seppuku, the ultimate Samurai mark of honor, on the battlefield. His death is a symbol to the emperor that Japan cannot afford to forget who they are and where they come from.

### **All Game of Thrones Characters – *A Song of Ice and Fire* – George R.R. Martin**

A major theme in GoT is that human is mortal, and death can be sudden and cruel. No one is safe in this series, not even the main characters. GoT can get away with arbitrary death because that is one of the major themes. One interpretation of "Winter is coming" is that death is inevitable. You cannot stop it any more than you can stop winter. You can only prepare for it.

### **The Symbolic Death**

*The character's death is less important than what their death symbolizes to the story as a whole. Either the way they die or the fact that they die at all is representative of a higher concept that has been threaded throughout the story.*

### **Hedwig – *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* – J.K. Rowling**

Hedwig represents the wonder Harry had when he was first introduced to the wizarding world, and she is the only contact he has with the wizarding world when he stays at the Drusley's. She dies when Harry leaves the Dursley's for the last time to fully join the wizarding world. J.K. Rowling herself explained that the death of Hedwig is the death of Harry's magical childhood.

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### **Denethor – *The Return of the King* – J.R.R. Tolkien**

In the battle of Minas Tirith, their steward Denethor is consumed with despair. His favorite son is dead, and he sent his last son on a suicide mission. Believing Faramir dead, he attempts suicide, burning them both alive. Though Pippin stops them, Denethor, on fire, jumps from the highest tower made by man into an ocean of orcs and darkness. A symbolic death of all hope.

### **Ophelia – *Hamlet* – William Shakespeare**

So much mystery surrounded Ophelia's death that it has inspired artists to paint her drowned in a river of flowers, and scholars debate whether she was murdered or committed suicide. What is most curious about her death is that it happens off-stage, right after a scene of her handing out flowers with cryptic phrases that straddle the line between prophecy and sexual innuendo. Her passive death could represent her loss of control in her own life, succumbing to the madness that surrounds her, as well as incredible beauty in death. Her descent into madness is a reflection of the alleged madness that Hamlet either pretends or is victim to.

### **The False Death**

*Several characters and often the audience believes a character is dead, dramatically changing the way they act or view the story. Often ends with a reveal that they are alive.*

### **Mark Watney – *The Martian* – Andy Weir**

While we know that Mark Watney survived the storm on Mars, the rest of the world does not. This is a massive case of dramatic irony, where some characters do not know what the audience knows. This creates complex emotions when we see other perspectives all the while hoping and praying they would only discover Mark is alive and do something to save him, and when NASA on earth discovers he is alive, they decide not to tell his returning crew so as not to hurt their morale.

### **Westley – *The Princess Bride* – William Goldman**

Numb from grief, Buttercup becomes a hollow shell when she learns her beloved Westley died. She resigns herself to marry Prince Humperdinck and gives in to a life of misery. When the man in black rescues her, despises him for mocking her pain, when really Westley was testing her to see if her love for him was still true and survived his apparent death.

### **Sherlock Holmes – *The Final Problem* – Sir Arthur Conan Doyle**

While Holmes never actually dies in the original stories, he fakes his death in *The Final Problem* when he fights Professor Moriarty and they throw themselves over a waterfall. In truth, Doyle fully intended for Holmes to die, as he was sick of the name and felt that his other works demanded more attention. However, due to overwhelming popular demand, he brought Holmes back to life in *The Empty House* and wrote it into the story that Holmes merely faked his death to hide from Moriarty's associates. Sure, Doyle wanted Holmes dead for good, but he came up with a brilliant way for Holmes to come back to life in-story that only added to the mystery and ingenuity of the character.

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### The Red Shirts

*Someone who dies at the beginning of a new threat, usually nameless with whom the audience has no emotional attachment, whose death highlights what's at stake should the heroes make the same mistake.*

#### **Satipo (the guy who dies in the beginning) – *Indiana Jones and the Lost Ark* – Steven Spielberg**

When walking into a tomb, it's always good to have a nameless character the audience has no attachment to set off all the traps. Satipo shows how dangerous the temple, getting covered in spiders and tripping a spear trap, so we know what's at stake if Indy fails. He also highlights Indy's skill, making mistakes where Indy does not.

#### **Will, Gared, and Ser Waymar – *A Game of Thrones* – George R.R. Martin**

In the first section of *A Game of Thrones*, three men are lost in the wilderness. Ser Waymer doesn't believe in the Wildlings, whereas Will is young and paranoid. They get slaughtered by monsters, and the only survivor gets beheaded in the next chapter for deserting his post. This shows the world of GoT. Death is inescapable. Not even PoV characters are safe from death.

#### **Alastor "Madeye" Moody – *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* – J.K. Rowling**

Despite the imposter incident of book 4, Moody is renowned and feared as the best Auror. If anyone can take on a dark wizard, it's Moody. In Harry's escape at the beginning of book 7, then it's both shocking and heartbreaking when he dies. If their best warrior falls, everyone is in danger. Moody is a known and well-loved character (uncommon of a red shirt) and his death happens off-screen for Harry to discover after the battle, making his death more powerful and driving home just how much the stakes have changed now that they've entered the war.

### Coping with Death

*Everyone reacts to death differently, but Sigmund Freud argues two distinct categories of response: **sorrow** (where you had a straightforward emotional connection to the dead character, whether negative or positive, understood that relationship, and experience a temporary grieving period that you later recover from) and **melancholy** (where your relationship to the dead was fluctuating, complicated, or otherwise not black-and-white, and you will never recover from their death because your connection will forever be unresolved).*

#### **Dallas Winston – *The Outsiders* – S.E. Hinton**

Dally is the tough guy among the Greasers, always carrying an unloaded gun and standing up to the threats of the Socs. He is incredibly protective of Johnny, a boy who got beat up by Socs early on. When Johnny is drowned in his attempt to save Ponyboy from a Soc attack, Dally cannot handle his death. Dally loved Johnny. Whether intentional or not, Dally dies by police shooting when he robs a store and flaunts his unloaded gun at the cops as a violent reaction to Johnny's death. While S.E. Hinton has claimed Dally's love for Johnny was not homosexual, many young readers prefer to interpret their relationship as an unfulfilled gay romance.

#### **Wilson – *Cast Away* – Robert Zemeckis**

When Chuck loses the volleyball Winston, he loses the only companion he had on that island. In this moment, he is profoundly isolated, alone of a raft in the middle of the ocean. Chuck's devastation at the loss of a volley ball shows just how hopeless he has become.

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### **Snowden – *Catch-22* – Joseph Heller**

Yossarian, a pilot in WWII, spends the entire book dealing with the gruesome death of a fellow pilot, Snowden. Even though the death happens chronologically before the book begins, the readers don't know what happened until the end of the book. From flack, Snowden's guts spill into the cockpit like an augury and Yossarian reads a fortune in them. He learns that man is mortal, and questions the point of the entire war. Throughout the book, Yossarian's sanity is questioned as he asks cryptic questions like, "What happened to the snowdens of yesteryear?" as Yossarian tries to understand the violent deaths in war. One could argue Yossarian's decision to act insane (and thus get discharged) or defect from the army is a direct response to Snowden's death.