THE MORAL PREMISE

HARNESSING VIRTUE & VICE
FOR BOX OFFICE SUCCESS

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I History & Theory

The chapters in this part examine the Moral Premise's definition, its use in history and modern time, relate it to natural law, define its structure, and demonstrate how the Moral Premise is used to help the filmmaker connect with the audience through character identification.

PREMISES AND VALUES

1

USES OF "PREMISE"

There are a number of different ways in which the term "premise" is used in our culture. They all flow from the same root, yet, depending on industry and context, the meanings are different. It's important that we understand the difference so the rest of this book is clear.

One use of *premise* refers to the *statement(s) of evidence in a logical argument*. Philosophy professor T. Edward Damer, in his book *Attacking Faulty Reasoning*, uses the term *premise* to help define an argument:

> An argument, then, is a group of statements [the *premises*], one or more of which support or provide evidence for another [the *conclusion*].[3]

R. W. Burch, a logician, also refers to premises in a similar way in *A Concise Introduction to Logic*:

> An argument is a group of statements, the purpose of which is that some of them [the *premises*] should support, imply, provide evidence for, or make reasonable to believe another particular one of them [the *conclusion*].[4]

In other words, formal logic uses the term "premise" to simply mean a statement of evidence or a statement of conclusion. In a court of law, the evidences presented to the jury are *evidence premises*, and the conclusion that the attorneys want the jury to arrive at is called a *concluding premise*.

As the insightful reader will discover, each scene of a well-structured and successful movie provides (to the audience/jury) some level of psychological *evidence* toward the movie's psychological *conclusion*, and the more consistently and truthfully that *evidence* is presented, the more believable will be the film's *conclusion*. But we're jumping ahead. Let's get back to defining just the term *premise*.

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[3] Damer, p 4.
[4] Burch, p. 1.

The second use of *premise* returns us to the entertainment industry and is the *explicit* or denotative story line of a film or television program, like a log line. For example, the explicit premise of *Fly Away Home* can be stated as: "A 13-year-old loses her mother and then takes on the care and raising of a nest full of orphaned goslings."[5] Another example is this explicit premise statement for *City Slickers*: "Three men attempt to deal with their mid-life crises by going on exotic adventures; this time, they go on a cattle round-up and learn a few things about cowboys and themselves."[6] In this book, I'll refer to this use of premise as simply the movie's log line or storyline.

Underneath the storyline, and supported by each scene's evidence, is the third use of the term *premise* — the dramatic heart of a story or film — what I call the *Moral Premise*. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, translator J. Hutton refers to the Moral Premise when he writes about the importance of "The poet's steady aim… the plot… must be the imitation of a unified action comprising a whole."[7] Michael Hauge, in *Writing Screenplays that Sell*, refers to the Moral Premise as the film's *theme*, which for *Tootsie* Hauge writes is: "For relationships to succeed, they must be based on honesty and friendship."[8] Hauge also calls the film's theme the "underlying level of morality… explored through the film" and the "universal statement the movie makes about the human condition."[9]

To understand the critical nature of the Moral Premise in films, however, we need to go deeper. To help us do that we look closely at how Lajos Egri defines *premise*.

LAJOS EGRI'S *PREMISE*

In 1946 Lajos Egri wrote *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, a book I've seen on more than one Hollywood writer's bookshelf. It is still in print. Other authors rarely reference Egri these days, in part I suppose because all of the prolific examples in his book are not movies but stage plays (some obscure and some classic). Yet Egri explains what we should all know as writers, and which the book you're holding attempts to update.

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[5] *Showtime* Internet movie listings. *http://www.mtv.com/movies/movie/111450/plot.jhtml*
[6] *Curran, S. et al*, no page number.
[7] Hutton, pp. 64, 54.
[8] Hauge, p. 82.
[9] Hauge, p. 74.

Egri calls the controlling idea or theme of a story simply the *premise*, and for 296 pages defines its central importance. Egri expounds on why it is the [moral] premise that defines the singular dramatic arc of the story and every character in it. With detailed examples and practical insight, Egri describes how the outward action of a character has no undergirding motivation without the [moral] premise. *Thought always precedes action*, he reminds us, and describes how the kindly Aunt Clara may make a fascinating character study because she takes "such devilish joy in making a lot of trouble for innocent people."[10] But as a writer you don't have a dramatic story until you understand [psychologically] why Aunt Clara interferes so maliciously. It is that "why" that helps to articulate the Moral Premise, and around which every other decision for the story hinges. It is Aunt Clara's inner motivation that reveals the secrets of her character so that you can understand her outward action and set her on the journey toward her goal.

Egri's dramatic heart of a story, what I call the *Moral Premise*, is what the story is all about at the implicit level, or what a logician might define as the *conclusion* of the film's argument. Egri points to *Romeo and Juliet's* premise: "Great love defies even death;" and to *Macbeth's* premise: "Ruthless ambition leads to its own destruction."[11] Note that these premises are moral in nature, they naturally make judgments of what is right and wrong, that is, love is right, ruthless ambition is wrong.

More importantly, Egri enlarges the concept of *premise* by telling of a man running down the street who is intercepted and asked where he is going. "How should I know where I'm going? I am on my way," he answers.[12] This, of course, is an absurd answer, as anyone sprinting with such determination must have a goal, a destination, or conclusion to his journey. Egri's premise then is the *goal*, the destination, or the story's conclusion. And such a destination must not only be clear for the screenwriter, but also to the screenplay's reader, the director, and the movie's audience. Egri elaborates for the would-be playwright:

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[10] Egri, p.9.
[11] Egri, pp.3-8.
[12] Egri, p.1.

> Our aim is to point to a road on which anyone who can write may travel and eventually find himself with a sure approach to drama. So, the *very first thing* you must have is a premise. And it must be a premise worded so that anyone can understand it as the author intended it to be understood. An unclear premise is as bad as no premise at all.
>
> The author using a badly worded, false, or badly constructed premise finds himself filling space and time with pointless dialogue — even action — and not getting anywhere near the proof of his premise. Why? Because he has no direction. [italics added] [13]

When Egri speaks of "filling space and time with pointless dialogue — even action," he refers to writing scenes of the play (or film) that do not support, with evidence, the premise, goal, or psychological conclusion of the film. Egri wants to persuade the playwright to create scenes of evidence that support or argue the "proof" of the conclusion or the premise of the play, or movie in our case.

MESSAGE vs. THEME vs. MORAL PREMISE

Let me make clear that in the context of the book you're holding, the terms *message*, *theme*, and *Moral Premise* are similar but not the same. Some people may interpret the term "message" to mean a "political message" such as "Drilling for oil in the ocean risks the destruction of ocean life as we know it." Such a political message has something to say to a particular group, in a limited region, at a point in time. But in the context of this book, the term "message" is not so limited. This book is not talking about political messages, but rather universal messages.

A "theme" is more often understood to be a universal truth that applies to just about all people, throughout all time, and in all places. For example, a theme might be, "For relationships to succeed, they must be based on honesty and friendship,"[14] which is Hauge's take on *Tootsie*. Hauge writes, "[The theme] is the filmmaker's way of saying, 'This is how to be a better human being.'"[15] As I discuss later, the theme

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[13] Egri, p.7.

[14] Hauge, p.82.

[15] Hauge, p.74.

is actually one half of the full Moral Premise, although implicit in the theme is the entire Moral Premise concept. In the immediate chapters I may use the terms interchangeably, but I will clarify their practical difference in Chapter 5.

For some writers, settling on the Moral Premise is the first decision they make when writing a new script. Novelist, playwright, and screenwriter Jonathan Gems, who has worked on several films including *1984*, *Batman,* and *Mars Attacks!*, gives this advice: "I figure out the theme before I come up with the actual story. Then I construct a story that tells the theme." Egri concurs:

> Every good play must have a well-formulated [moral] premise.... No idea, and no situation, was ever strong enough to carry you through to its logical conclusion *without a clear-cut premise*.
>
> If you have no such premise, you may modify, elaborate, vary your original idea or situation, or even lead yourself into another situation, but you will not know where you are going. You will flounder, rack your brain to invent further situations to round out your play. You may find these situations — and you will still be without a play.
>
> *You must have a premise* — a premise which will lead you unmistakably to the goal your play hopes to reach.[16]

Moral Premises are important because they articulate first to the writer and then to the audience what the movie is *really* about. To the writer, this means there is a short sentence or phrase by which to measure the writing of each scene to ensure its focus. To the audience, the Moral Premise provides a gathering point for the many thoughts and ideas that may have appeared spurious or random up to a particular juncture in the story. Toward the end, these thoughts and ideas point boldly at what the earlier scenes were all about. This gathering, scene by scene, indicates the writer's moral position about the underlying topic.

In drama, driving the action forward toward a common purpose is all-important. To keep each scene focused on the premise, or, in other words, to ensure that each scene is providing evidence in support of the

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[16] Egri, p.6.

argument's conclusion, Egri suggests that "a good premise is a thumbnail synopsis of your play."[17] Thus, Egri's premise "Frugality leads to waste" can be a synopsis for a story in which a frugal character refuses to pay his taxes (frugality) and is subsequently caught (leads to) and forced to pay a huge penalty (waste). Each and every scene must reinforce some aspect of this three-part conclusion or the argument of the film is weakened, lessening the audience's conviction that the premise is true or right. Egri writes:

> There are many solutions for any given situation, [but] *your characters are permitted to choose only those which will help prove the premise*. The moment you decide upon a premise, you and your characters become its slave. Each character must feel, intensely, that the action dictated by the premise is the *only action possible*. [italics in original] [18]

This consistency of the Moral Premise to which Egri alludes — in each action and each scene — is the keystone of a story's success. Just as the Moral Premise describes the conflict that should appear in each scene, so each scene reinforces the conflict summarized by the Moral Premise.

Now, this is a good place to shift our discussion to what precipitates a story's moral conflict, securing your understanding of *why* the Moral Premise is so important.

CONFLICT OF VALUES

Joel Silvers, a university screenwriting and filmmaking instructor, suspects that before students can understand story structure, they must first understand that the physical or outward conflict grows out of an inner conflict of values. Only after there is a clear understanding of the inner conflict of values can a characters make a value-oriented decision that has the potential of physical action. With such a value conflict in the psychological air, the structure of physical conflict makes a lot more sense to talk about.[19] For in a movie, as opposed to a novel, the principal conflict must be physical and visible. But even in a novel, action is inevitable, and that action is always based on a set of values that are in conflict between characters.

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[17] Egri, p.8.

[18] Egri, p.1151.

[19] Joel Silvers, personal communication, March 25, 2005.

This awareness of the importance of conflict between values is critical to formulating a Moral Premise, which articulates the psychological spine of good stories. Psychologically, a set of values is the fertilizer for ideas, ideologies, and thoughts that course through our mind and soul and gives us motivation to take action. If filmmakers, therefore, do not understand the basic need of stories to grow from the conflict of values, then the filmmaker's attempts at filmmaking will be nothing more than the unmotivated juxtapositions of images and sound. It is the lack of a story based in the conflict of values structured around a Moral Premise that leaves audiences with a sense that the movie they just gave two hours of their life to was a wasteland of meaning. Conflict is essential but it must be rooted in values and structured around a Moral Premise.

IDENTIFYING VALUES

It is not unusual to meet young film students, or even adult film enthusiasts, who do not have a clear idea of what a value is. We all have them, but few of us ever stop to think about what they are, or which ones motivate our lives. This is especially disastrous for filmmakers who need to create characters with motivations. So what follows, from three different lists, is an attempt to make us aware of what values are and how they drive the decisions our characters need to make.

Benjamin Franklin's Virtues

The first list will be familiar to those who have read Benjamin Franklin's autobiography. Franklin's thinking related to values directly affects our formulation of Moral Premises. So, here is Franklin's introduction to his list of values, or virtues as he calls them.

> It was about this time I conceiv'd the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wish'd to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of

more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employ'd in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason. I concluded, at length, that the mere speculative conviction that it was our interest to be completely virtuous, was not sufficient to prevent our slipping; and that the contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct. For this purpose I therefore contrived the following method.

Franklin did some research and came up with a list of virtues that he decided were meaningful to his particular proclivity and need for personal improvement. Notice, he recognized that his outward actions were directed by his inner values. Here is his list of virtues, with their precepts as he explained and spelt them.

Table 1 — Benjamin Franklin's Virtues and Precepts	
Temperance	Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.
Silence	Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.
Order	Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.
Resolution	Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.
Frugality	Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing.
Industry	Lose no time; be always employ'd in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.
Sincerity	Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly, and, if you speak, speak accordingly.
Justice	Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.

Moderation	Avoid extremes; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.
Cleaniness	Tolerate no uncleanliness in body, clothes, or habitation.
Tranquillity	Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
Chastity	Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.
Humility	Imitate Jesus and Socrates.

Intent on turning these values into visible actions Franklin writes:

I made a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues. I rul'd each page with red ink, so as to have seven columns, one for each day of the week, marking each column with a letter for the day. I cross'd these columns with thirteen red lines, marking the beginning of each line with the first letter of one of the virtues, on which line, and in its proper column, I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day.

I determined to give a week's strict attention to each of the virtues successively. Thus, in the first week, my great guard was to avoid even the least offence against Temperance, leaving the other virtues to their ordinary chance, only marking every evening the faults of the day. Thus, if in the first week I could keep my first line, marked T, clear of spots, I suppos'd the habit of that virtue so much strengthen'd and its opposite weaken'd, that I might venture extending my attention to include the next, and for the following week keep both lines clear of spots. Proceeding thus to the last, I could go thro' a course compleat in thirteen weeks, and four courses in a year.[20]

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20 Franklin, pp. 128 ff.

Now the insightful dramatist will, upon surveying such a list as Franklin's, recognize the deep potential such a list provides for dramatic stories. For implicitly juxtaposed next to each of Franklin's virtues is an obvious vice, or potential conflict of values. We can imagine a character, like Franklin, who let's say is a U.S. Ambassador in Paris, where he is invited to dine with French diplomats and offered a glass of rare and expensive French wine. But because our character values temperance to the point of abstinence, the U.S. Ambassador offends his host by refusing to partake of something his French peers would consider a great value. As the night progresses, this initial and subtle conflict over wine escalates into disagreements on other levels that lead to physical, even international conflict.

Hyrum W. Smith's Governing Values

In his book, *The 10 Natural Laws of Successful Time and Life Management*, Hyrum Smith presents a list of "governing values" that resulted from a 1992 nationwide survey conducted by his Franklin Quest Co. To those of you who have ever taken a Franklin Planner seminar or read any number of their books on time management, this list of values will seem familiar. These are ranked in order of frequency of occurrence in the survey results.

Table 2 — Franklin Quest's Survey of Governing Values[21]

1. Spouse	16. Intelligence and wisdom
2. Financial security	17. Understanding
3. Personal health and fitness	18. Quality of life
4. Children and family	19. Happiness/Positive attitude
5. Spirituality/Religion	20. Pleasure
6. A sense of accomplishment	21. Self-control
7. Integrity and honesty	22. Ambition
8. Occupational satisfaction	23. Being capable
9. Love for others/Service	24. Imagination and creativity
10. Education and learning	25. Forgiveness
11. Self-respect	26. Generosity
12. Taking responsibility	27. Equality
13. Exercising leadership	28. Friendship
14. Inner harmony	29. Beauty
15. Independence	30. Courage

[21] Smith, p. 63-64.

Again, the opportunities for conflict and drama from this list are great. First, there is the obvious conflict between any one of these values and its imagined opposite:

Self-respect vs. Self-destruction
Independence vs. Dependence
Equality vs. Bigotry
Forgiveness vs. Bitterness
Courage vs. Cowardice

But, second, there is another level of conflict that provides a more interesting dramatic dilemma — when a virtue is taken so far that it becomes a vice. Integrity and honesty can be taken so far that telling the truth can endanger the lives of those we love. Courage can be misinterpreted or taken so far as to take foolish risks for no noble purpose. Self-respect can turn into arrogance. Defense of freedom can lead to wars that decimate civilizations. Forgiveness can disregard justice that also needs to be served.

In these ways values are the taproot of stories that give our movies meaning and our audiences understanding and satisfaction.

Laurie Beth Jones

Finally, here is a succinct list of values from Laurie Beth Jones' *The Path: The Field Guide*, where she lays out a plan for creating a personal mission statement. One of the steps Jones takes the reader through is the identification of core values that *motivate* one to *action*. I'm pretty sure she wasn't thinking of writing screenplays or creating stories when she came up with this list, but she was thinking of motivating people. Our task as screenwriters and filmmakers, of course, is to motivate characters into and out of dramatic conflict. One of the questions Jones asks her reader is "What concept or principle would you be willing to die for?" That's a great question to ask your protagonist when you're developing his or her character; and an even more important question to ask your antagonist, although the antagonist's willing-to-die-for-value may be the opposite of one in Jones' list.

Table 3 — Laurie Beth Jones' Core Values

Truth	Self-Worth	Safety
Integrity	Dignity	Relationships
Honesty	Respect	Kindness
Freedom	Inner Peace	Service
Trust	Love	Equality
Faith	Positive Attitude	Excellence
Justice	Hope	Nobility
Wholeness	Joy	Humility
Honor	Charity	Simplicity

Antagonists

Speaking of antagonists, let me clear up a misconception. A story's antagonist is the character or force that opposes the protagonist. We normally think of the antagonist as someone who wants to stop the protagonist at all costs, such as Hans Gruber in *Die Hard*. But the antagonist may be someone who actually wants to help the protagonist, although their outward actions create major obstacles, such as Sergeant Foley in *An Officer and a Gentleman*. The antagonist may also be an unwitting obstacle such as the public's willingness to sue superheroes in *The Incredibles*. Antagonists may also be lovers or friends in romantic comedies such as what Sally is to Harry and Harry is to Sally in *When Harry Met Sally*. In the television series, *Touched by An Angel*, the angels are the antagonists as they throw obstacles in the weekly protagonist's path to help them change. And finally, the story's antagonist may be one's own self such as Bruce Nolan's immaturity in *Bruce Almighty*.

PREMISE GENRES AND CONFLICT OF VALUES

At the beginning of this book I listed a number of film genres. Here is the list a second time, for your convenience.

Table 4 — Movie Genres

Action	Detective	Love
Adventure	Disaster	Musicals
Art	Epic	Myth
Buddy	Fantasy	Road
Capers	Film Noir	Romance
Comedy	Gangster	Sci-Fi
Coming-of-Age	Ghost	Social
Courtroom	Historical	Thrillers
Crime	Horror	Westerns

While it is outside the scope of this book, each of these genres typically explores a limited number of moral values in conflict. For instance, adventure films frequently explore the conflict of secrecy vs. discovery. Coming-of-age films frequently explore the values of self-expression vs. conformity. Historical dramas are often about the clash of tradition vs. revolution. Science Fiction often sets up a conflict between technology and humanity.

One way to categorize the conflict of values in narratives is to look for them in one of six basic plots expanded from the four in Aristotle's *Poetics*: (1) man against man; (2) man against nature; (3) man against himself; (4) man against the supernatural; (5) man against society; and (6) man against machine.[22]

A more extensive categorization of conflict can be found in Georges Polti's classic work, *The 36 Dramatic Situations* (see Table 5). Polti painstakingly demonstrates that all stories are simply variations of only 36 basic plots that originate from "fundamental human emotional [value] conflicts."

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[22] Aristotle's *Poetics*, XVIII. Baehr's expanded list (p. 176) based on Ingram Bywater's translation identifies the four as: complex, suffering, character, and spectacle. S. H. Butcher's translation lists: complex, pathetic, ethical, and simple. I come up with: (1) reversal of fortune that comes from a surprising discovery; (2) physical suffering that results from misapplied passion; (3) psychological struggle resulting from an ethical dilemma; (4) battle with supernatural forces.

Table 5 — George Polti's 36 Dramatic Situations[23]

1. Supplication
2. Deliverance
3. Crime pursued by vengeance
4. Vengeance taken for kindred upon kindred
5. Pursuit
6. Disaster
7. Falling prey to cruelty or misfortune
8. Revolt
9. Daring enterprise
10. Abduction
11. The enigma
12. Obtaining
13. Enmity of kinsmen
14. Rivalry of kinsmen
15. Murderous adultery
16. Madness
17. Fatal imprudence
18. Involuntary crimes of love
19. Slaying of a kinsman unrecognized
20. Self-sacrificing for an ideal
21. Self-sacrifice for kindred
22. All sacrificed for a passion
23. Necessity of sacrificing loved ones
24. Rivalry of superior and inferior
25. Adultery
26. Crimes of love
27. Discovery of the dishonor of a loved one
28. Obstacles to love
29. An enemy loved
30. Ambition
31. Conflict with a god
32. Mistaken jealousy
33. Erroneous judgment
34. Remorse
35. Recovery of a lost one
36. Loss of loved ones

Conflict in these classifications describes not only the physical drama of the explicit premise but also the psychological drama of the Moral Premise.

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There are, however, some modern critics (and paid story consultants) who claim that for films to be popular they do not need a moral center or a Moral Premise. Research[24] suggests, however, that when other production values, attachments, and distribution are in place, the film with a strong moral center will succeed; but when a moral center is

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23 Polti, p. 3.
24 See the Appendix.

missing or inconsistently applied, regardless of the other production values, attachments, or distribution, the ticket sales will always disappoint. Even putting research aside, a cursory examination will affirm that psychological moral dilemmas are at the heart of every successful story. Cynical storytellers and consultants may want to deny that fact, but they will never abandon it in their own stories. And in the next chapter we'll take a look at a number of examples of the moral essence of storytelling throughout history.

In the Bedroom's Moment of Grace — Father McClasslin sits with Ruth Fowler at her son's gravesite, offering her the opportunity to ask forgiveness for the anger she confesses — the literal offering of grace through the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession). © 2001, Miramax Films

EXERCISES

1. List and define the different uses of the term "premise."

2. Contrast and compare the terms "message," "theme," and "Moral Premise" as they apply to stories and especially motion picture narratives.

3. Moral Premises are rooted in values. Select a number of film genres from the list in this chapter, and for each, list two conflicting values that a film in the genre might explore. Explain how those values are germane to the genre.

4. To expand your awareness of basic dramatic conflict, choose a number of Polti's dramatic situations and for each: (1) identify two characters with opposing values; and (2) describe how the contrasting values of these characters might create a dramatic situation worthy of a story.

The moral premise "is comprised of four parts: a virtue, a vice, desirable consequences (success), and undesirable consequences (defeat). These four parts can be used to create a statement that describes precisely what a movie is really about, on both physical and psychological levels. This is the formal structure of a Moral Premise: [Vice] leads to defeat, but [Virtue] leads to success" (p 60). Throughout the book, Williams presents the moral premise as the subtext underlying Knowing the MP (Moral Premise) is the biggest step you can make in understanding Theme. Because of inaccurate information, bad data, and inclement teaching weather patterns, this idea of theme has become convoluted beyond recognition. But I urge you, go out and purchase The Moral Premise and theme will become completely clear to you. Simply, the MP is the entire theme and what you think of as theme is simply one-half of the MP. Make sense? The Moral Premise reveals the foundational concept at the heart of all storytelling and successful box office movies. In concrete terms it explains how you can create your own success and, in the process, entertain, delight, challenge, and uplift this generation and the ones to come. Â the Moral Premise â€" a statement of truth about the protagonistâ€™s psychological predicament. Like. Comment.