

"Lawrence of Arabia" Deconstructed Propp Style By John G. Thomas

In 1962, David Lean's "Lawrence of Arabia" quickly became one of the great epic films of all time. With his Super Panavision camera firmly locked on the horizon, a young Peter O'Toole and hundreds of camels walked across the wide screen collecting seven Oscars® in the process. The film's screenwriters, Robert Bolt and Michael Wilson loosely based their screenplay on T.E. Lawrence's own memoir published in 1927.

Suppose for a moment the writers had to submit a logline to one of today's narrow-minded, Armani-clad studio development executives? What would it look like? Try this: "During WW1, a young English aristocrat assumes an Arabian persona and leads thousands of desert tribesmen in a battle to chase the Turkish army out of the Mideast."

Lawrence is unusual in that it begins by showing the death of the hero in a motorcycle accident. After that the film actually unspools in the form of a two hour chronological flashback documenting his swaggering years in the Arabian desert.

It's difficult to associate every one of [Propp's narratemes](#) in Lawrence because there's no clearly-defined human antagonist. Is it the Turkish army which Lawrence must ultimately defeat? Perhaps the British military and political establishment as represented by the duplicitous General Allenby? Lawrence is also confronted by characters which initially act as antagonists but are actually there just to test his character. Instead, David Lean puts the real antagonist right in front of your eyes in nearly every scene in the film: the vast Arabian desert.

Let's see if Lawrence has enough story units, or narratemes, to fit into Propp's folktale story structure. (Remember that not all of Propp's narratemes need apply to a story.)

- 1. Something's Missing:** Someone, or something is missing or is in danger in the lead character's world. We find Lawrence stationed in Cairo as a map maker for the British army. What's missing in his life is excitement – he's bored to death. Of course, there's WW1 to consider too.
- 2. The Warning:** The hero is cautioned, "You are too young or weak." His fellow English officers regard Lawrence as a clown. General Allenby considers Lawrence an intellectual, not a soldier.
- 3. Violation:** The antagonist disturbs the peace or poses a threat. The deadly threat of the Turkish army's occupation of the Mideast territories.
- 4. Reconnaissance:** The antagonist often wants to know where the children or a precious object are located. According to General Allenby, this has happened prior to Lawrence's direct involvement.
- 5. Delivery:** The antagonist obtains information to use against the protagonist. The success of the Turkish army indicates they know the Arab tribes are too divided to be an effective deterrent.
- 6. Trickery:** The antagonist tries to fool the hero. The General will soon promise Lawrence the artillery he will need even though he has no intention of actually providing the weapons.
- 7. Complicity:** The hero falls for it. Lawrence will accept the assignment unaware that he must do it all alone.
- 8. Villainy and Lack:** The antagonist threatens or harms someone important to the hero. We are informed that the Turkish army occupies major Mideast cities which prevents the shipment of weapons and supplies to the Arabian tribes scattered across the desert.
- 9. The Challenge:** The hero is informed of the "lack." General Allenby offers Lawrence a dangerous desert mission to locate Prince Feisal, (Alec Guinness) and learn of his intentions – nothing else.
- 10. Counteraction:** The protagonist chooses to accept the challenge. He is warned of the dangers but Lawrence jumps at the chance. He prefers to view the assignment as a desert romp, or as he says, "fun."
- 11. Departure:** The hero leaves and is joined by the "helper." Lawrence begins the long journey from Cairo to deep into the desert accompanied by his Bedouin guide, "Bedou."
- 12. The Test:** A challenge for the protagonist. Lawrence's guide, Bedou, is killed by Sherif Ali, (Omar Sharif) for drinking water from a well without permission.
- 13. Reaction:** The hero responds positively and bravely to the test. Lawrence boldly stands up to Sherif Ali who is impressed by the Englishman's courage. Lawrence follows Ali and survives an air attack from the Turks. Ali becomes his new "helper."
- 14. Acquisition:** The hero learns a skill or obtains important information. Lawrence meets Prince Feisal and learns of his intentions. Feisal says, "We need a miracle" and questions Lawrence's sincerity. Lawrence decides that he must travel to the port city of Aqaba, defeat the Turks and obtain weapons for Feisal's army. Ali warns that the desert cannot be crossed and that Lawrence is "mad."
- 15. Transport:** The hero must travel to reach his goal. While crossing the desert a man falls from his camel and Ali insists he be left behind to die. Lawrence saves the man's life, returns to the tribe as a hero and is made an honorary Arab. With Lawrence's insistence, the leader of another powerful tribe,

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Auda abu Tayi, (Anthony Quinn) agrees to join their fight.

16. **Confrontation:** This may not be the climatic battle. Lawrence and the Arabian tribes attack the Turks in Aqaba. Many die.
17. **Injury:** The hero is injured, "marked," or set back in his quest, but not mortally wounded. Tribal rules force Lawrence to kill the man he had rescued in the desert in order to maintain peace among the tribes. Lawrence is captured, tortured, raped and "marked" by the Turks.
18. **Victory:** Hero beats the bad guy, but his victory may only be temporary. The defeat of the Turks opens a lifeline for the Arab fighters.
19. **Resolution:** The initial lack may or may not have been fixed. They win the Aqaba battle, but not the war.
20. **The Hero Returns:** Communications are severed and Lawrence must travel back across the desert to Cairo and inform General Allenby of his victory.
21. **Pursuit:** The hero is chased by the antagonist who tries again to kill him or take back what the hero has obtained. With blinding sandstorms, searing heat and quicksand the desert punishes Lawrence and kills a companion.
22. **The Rescue:** The hero narrowly escapes due to a new skill or moral realization. Lawrence's transformation from an English aristocrat into a desert denizen gives him the special skills needed to traverse the desert.
23. **Back Home:** Home, but he/she is unrecognized, or must hide from danger. Dazed and confused, Lawrence staggers into Cairo and is treated rudely as a lower-class Arab. However, General Allenby promotes Lawrence to Major.
24. **The False Claim:** The hero appears absent, others spread false rumors or question his heroic character. Bentley, the newspaper reporter, cannot find Lawrence in the war zone. He wanted to portray Lawrence as a war hero but Prince Feisal makes him reconsider.
25. **The Difficult Task:** The hero must do the impossible. Lawrence and his disheveled army must cut the desert railroad link which supplies the Turkish army.
26. **Task Performed:** The hero accomplishes the impossible task. Lawrence's army attacks and destroys two Turkish supply trains. But there is much killing and looting which deeply affects Lawrence. Surviving a minor gunshot wound, Lawrence begins to believe he is invincible.
27. **Recognition:** The protagonist is acknowledged by someone who is important to the hero. Back in Cairo, General Allenby notes Lawrence's amazing victories and mentions that there is a large reward for his death. The General wishes he was "valued" as highly.
28. **False Claim is Exposed:** The false hero is usually revealed as a direct result of the hero having performed the impossible task. Due to his carelessness, Lawrence is captured and tortured by the Turks and Lawrence himself is exposed to be just a man and not supernatural.
29. **Acknowledgement:** The hero is recognized by everyone else. Lawrence and the Arab armies arrive in Damascus before the English army. General Allenby is amazed again.
30. **The Hero Wins:** The bad guy loses in a climatic battle. Lawrence's Arab tribes quickly defeat the Turkish army. Unfortunately, the tribal leaders disagree among themselves, the Arabs return to the desert and the English assume control of Damascus – just as they had planned.
31. **The Hero Returns:** The hero gets the girl and his character has been changed forever. Prince Feisal would thank Lawrence, (who has been promoted to Colonel) but the dejected Englishman is already heading back to England and the future Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is born.

I've found that when a section of a screenplay moves too slow, or when the drama doesn't jump off the page and grab you, Propp's narratemes can be just what you need. Perhaps your hero wasn't "tested?" Could you use a "false hero" to liven things up? How about some trickery?

When using this approach don't get stuck following the outline too closely. Try tossing a narrateme out or move them up or down a notch and see what it does for your screenplay.

Good Luck!

John G. Thomas (BA, Cinema, University of Southern California / MA, Screenwriting) has produced, directed and edited just under 40 documentary, short, commercial and music videos and seven feature-length films in a nearly 40 year film and television career. Winner of numerous national and international awards, he teaches film and television at Los Angeles area universities. He can be reached at Easy-Budget.com