7. TEN POINTS ON PLOTTING

1. Nothing should happen at random. Every element in a story should have significance, whether for verisimilitude, symbolism, or the intended climax. Names, places, actions and events should all be purposeful. To test the significance of an element, ask: Why this place and not another? Why this name and not another? Why this action, this speech, and not others—or none at all? The answers should be: To persuade the reader of the story's plausibility; to convey a message about the theme of the story; to prepare the reader for the climax so that it seems both plausible and in keeping with the theme.

2. Plot stems from character under adversity. A mild-mannered person cannot achieve his goals by an out-of-character action like a violent assault, unless we have prepared the reader for it by revealing a glimpse of some suppressed aspect of his personality that can be plausibly released by stress. And the stress itself must also be plausible, given the circumstances of the story.

3. Each character has an urgent personal agenda. Too much is at stake to abandon that agenda without good reason. We may not share the character's urgency, but we should be able to see why he cares so much about what he's doing. A character who acts without real motivation is by definition melodramatic, doing outrageous things for the sake of the thrill it gives the reader—not because it makes sense for the character to do so.

4. **The plot of a story is the synthesis of the plots of its individual characters.** Each character has a personal agenda, modified by conflict or concordance with the agendas of others. The villain doesn't get everything his way, any more than the hero does; each keeps thwarting the other, who must then improvise under pressure.

5. The plot "begins" long before the story. The story itself should begin at the latest possible moment before the climax, at a point when events take a decisive and irreversible turn. We may learn later, through flashbacks, exposition, or inference, about events occurring before the beginning of the story.

6. Foreshadow all important elements. The first part of a story is a kind of prophecy; the second part fulfills the prophecy. Any important character, location, object should be foreshadowed early in the story. The *deus ex machina* is unacceptable; you can't pull a rabbit out of your hat to rescue your hero. But you can't telegraph your punch either—your readers don't want to see what's coming, especially if your characters seem too dumb to see it. The trick is to put the plot element into your story without making the reader excessively aware of its importance. Chance and coincidence, in particular, require careful preparation if they are going to influence the plot.

7. Keep in mind the kind of story you're telling. Any story is about the relationship of an individual to society. A *comic* story describes an isolated individual achieving social integration either by being accepted into an existing society or by forming his own. This integration is often symbolized by a wedding or feast. A *tragic* story describes an integrated individual who becomes isolated; death is simply a symbol of this isolation. The plot should keep us in some degree of suspense about what kind of story we're reading. Even if we know it's a comedy, the precise nature of the comic climax should come as a surprise. If we know the hero is doomed, his downfall should stem from a factor we know about but have not given sufficient weight to.

8. Ironic plots subvert their surface meanings. Here, an ordinarily desirable goal appears very unattractive to us: the hero marries, but chooses the wrong girl and turns his story into a tragedy. Or the hero may die, but gains some improvement in social acceptance as a result—by becoming a martyr or social savior, for example.

9. The hero must eventually take charge of events. In any plot the hero is passive for a time, reacting to events. At some point he must try to take charge. This is the *counterthrust,* when the story goes into high gear. In some cases we may have a series of thrusts and counterthrusts; in the opening stages of the plot, the counterthrust helps define the hero's character and puts him in position for more serious conflicts (and counterthrusts) later in the story. You could even say that every scene presents the hero with a problem; his response is his counterthrust. In the larger structure of the plot, the counterthrust often comes after the hero's original plan of action has failed; he has learned some hard lessons and now he will apply them as he approaches the climax of the story.

10. Plot dramatizes character. If all literature is the story of the quest for identity, then plot is the roadmap of that quest. Every event, every response, should reveal (to us if not to them) some aspect of the characters' identities. Plot elements dramatize characters' identities by providing opportunities to be brave or cowardly, stupid or brilliant, generous or mean. These opportunities come in the form of *severe stress*, appropriate to the kind of story you're telling. A plot element used for its own sake—a fistfight, a sexual encounter, an ominous warning—is a needless burden to the story if it does not illuminate the characters involved. Conversely, the reader will not believe any character trait that you have not dramatized through a plot device.

Assignment:

Write a letter to yourself about three key elements in your protagonist's character—elements that will be crucial to the climax of the story. Then suggest to yourself events or actions that will demonstrate those character elements. As you write, ask yourself how those events or actions might plausibly emerge in the story. Then ask yourself how you could prepare for those events by describing still other events and actions.

Do the same for other key characters, especially the antagonist.

Finally, write the "back story": The events and actions that eventually trigger the story itself.