

## **The Art Of Dramatic Writing by Lajos Egri**

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*"The premise is the seed that grows into a plant that was contained in it, no more and no less."*

### **Background information:**

Born in Hungary, Lajos Egri wrote and directed successfully in Europe and the USA for over 35 years and founded the "Egri School of Writing" in New York City, of which he was the director. At the age of 60 he moved to Los Angeles to teach and work with the film industry. The great success of his work "The Art of Dramatic Writing", published in 1946, is based on a completely new interpretation approach in dramaturgy and can be seen as a trailblazer for Robert McKee's "Story" and Christopher Vogler's "The Hero's Journey." Like Lessing, Egri gives the character a higher priority than the plot and is thus in contradiction to Aristotle. He even goes a step further and describes the character and his environment as inextricably linked, an aspect that is also important to McKee. For Egri, a three-dimensional character and a clearly formulated premise are the prerequisites for a functioning drama. Its course results organically from these two elements. To underpin his theory, Egri cites numerous examples from the latest findings of the time in the sciences, sociology, psychology, chemistry and physics. In his structure of drama, Egri rediscovered the laws of the universe and chemistry. Using socio-psychological methods, he describes the human being as one that can be completely analyzed. For Egri, the world can also be fully explained and these explanations can be conveyed. Hence his usage of the pattern of a dialogue between student and teacher, as Socrates used it, too. Egri derives the structure of the drama on the one hand from the dialectical relationship of the character to his environment, but he also considers the classic triad an unshakable law. Egri explains the relationships between the acts solely from the development of the protagonist of a play, which represents a new approach to interpretation.

### **Definition of the drama:**

"Emotion, or the elements in or of an emotion, constitute the essential elements of life. Emotions are life. Hence emotion is drama. Drama is emotion. "

### **Structure of the drama:**

Aristotle's assertion that the structure of events make up a story is diametrically contradicted by Egri:

"We believe the obligatory scene, the tension, the atmosphere and the rest are superficial elements. They are the effect of something else, something much more important. There is a force that binds all these parts together, a force from which they grow naturally like limbs out of the body. We believe we know what this force is: Human character: in all its infinite expansions and dialectical contradictions."

Egri also describes Aristotle's statement that every story must have a beginning, a middle and an end as not applicable. According to Egri, a play begins at the point where a crucial need of the protagonist arises that steers the story in a dramatic direction. Egri describes this point as the "point of attack." It is triggered by a crisis or a far-reaching decision from the character's previous history. The plot begins with the beginning of the play, but by then we may already be well in the middle of the character's story. In the course of the plot, the beginning of the character's story is then revealed to the audience. Egri therefore feels that the term "point of attack" is more appropriate for the beginning of the action than the usual term "exposition", since exposition can be translated as revelation. The character is revealed not only at the beginning but during the entire piece up to the end. Every action or refusal of action gives information about the character and their history, as well as about the further course of the action. While drama is largely made up of emotion, no emotion has ever shaped a good piece if the emotion is not preceded by motivation. The premise is not only the prerequisite for the story, but also determines its structure, the course and the actual message. The premise is an assertion made by the author that he wants to prove as the story unfolds. Every good premise is made up of three parts. The first part of the premise indicates the character, the second the conflict, and the third the end of the piece. An action should follow the rules of dialectic: The thesis is followed by the antithesis, the conflict between the two creates a synthesis that becomes a thesis again when it is contrasted with an antithesis. In a story, thesis and antithesis result from the will of the character and the opposing will of his environment. The resulting moment(s) of conflict is/are the real exposure or exposition of the character. Hence the premise of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is: "Great love defies death." The "great love" describes the character of the protagonists, "defies" provides information about the conflict between the will of the protagonists and the will of those around them, "death" indicates the outcome of the story, ie the suicide of the lovers.

From the following synthesis the further action of the character and the reaction to it are derived, which causes another conflict. In the course of the piece, the conflict between thesis and antithesis increases to the climax. A growing conflict is the result of a clearly formulated premise and well-coordinated, three-dimensional characters. Transitions between the conflict elements connect disconnected elements. A crisis describes a decisive change in the danger it creates. Crises must be based on the choice of characters, which in turn represent thesis and antithesis. The climax follows the greatest possible crisis.

**Basic dramatic principles:**

The protagonist provokes the conflict which starts the story. There is no story without the protagonist. "Aristotle's assumption that the character is subordinate to the action ("a tragedy is possible without character but not without action.") is his fundamental mistake, because the character motivates the action and not the other way around. The protagonist is aggressive (active or passive) and has a strong need. Egri describes him as the central character around whom everything revolves (pivotal character). Without the central character, the conflict on which the story is based, and thus the story itself, would not exist. The central character desires something so strongly that in order to achieve its goal he/she destroys or is destroyed as a result. He is aggressive, uncompromising, even nefarious, whether in the positive or negative sense. The central character, even if he/she appears passive, is the driving force, which is the result of the external forces acting on it and its internal forces. The central character does not have to be the supposed hero, he/she is rather the one who insists on his goal. Egri describes Iago as the central character in "Othello," as Krogstad is in "The Dollhouse." The antagonist is the protagonist's opponent. The two opponents are equally strong and driven by an equally strong opposite need. Characters should be formed after real human beings, therefore all actions should be motivated. A realistic representation is achieved through a three-dimensional drawing of the character. The three dimensions are the physiological, sociological and psychological levels of the character's being. Due to his physical attributes, the character occupies a certain position in society, and thus has a certain perspective. A disabled person sees the world differently and is perceived by it differently than a non-disabled person. The physical appearance influences thinking, values and behavior.

The second defining dimension emerges from the sociological background of the character (sociological characteristics are: belonging to a social class, type of employment, income, upbringing, schooling, family structure, religion, race, nationality and role in society, group behavior). The psychological outline of a character is the third dimension and the product of the former two. (Psychological characteristics are: sexual behavior, moral attitude, personal premise, ambition, frustration, disappointment, temperament (choleric, relaxed, pessimistic, optimistic), attitude towards life (active, passive), obsessions, inhibitions, fears, extroversion, introversion, skills and talents, IQ). It includes the feelings, the temperament, the mood of a person as a result of his dispositions and his environment. How a character makes decisions and how they react to events derive from these three defining dimensions. "A character is revealed by conflict, conflict is initiated by a decision, a decision is made based on the premise of the play."

A conflict that is not related to the specific expression of a character is dramatically insignificant. The decisions of the character determine the course of the action towards its actual goal: the demonstration of the premise. The development of events takes a certain course through the character, but the character is changed by the course of the story. Because, firstly: "No person who has ever lived has stayed the same after a series of conflicts that touched his life: his perspective on life changes." And second: "Character and environment are so closely related that we see them as one. They react to each other." The composition of the characters must be well coordinated. The types must not be too similar, but must differ in their character traits in order to create a unity of opposites. The needs of the

opponents must be mutually exclusive (e.g. two men love the same woman). The storyline must be based on the inevitable force of necessity, as this motivates the characters to act in a way in which they would not have under normal circumstances. Action is always the result of an impulse, there is no unmotivated action.

A conflict describes the clash of mutually exclusive motives or actions. A real conflict only exists when the opponents, their actions, motivations and causes are balanced. A predictable outcome makes a fight uninteresting. Egri differentiates between four types of conflict: static, jumping, slowly growing and "foreshadowing." When the protagonist is weak and doesn't make decisions that move the piece forward, the resulting conflict is static. This indicates that you have chosen a "point of attack" too early and that you have to let the character mature before you put him into action. In a jumping conflict, the character acts in a way that makes his actions incomprehensible. Here transitions and motivations have to be checked. Egri describes the growing conflict as the only acceptable form of conflict. It is always accompanied by "foreshadowing", an action that points towards the end. A piece consists of a certain number of conflicts. In the course of the piece, significance and consequences of the conflicts must increase. However, all conflicts must also be part of the overall conflict of the piece and thus confirm the premise. Small conflicts create the transition between two attitudes of the character until he is forced to make a decision that makes him grow. The central character generally grows less than the other characters because he is already at the beginning on a higher level of development, which determines the motivation for his action. Any good piece grows from one end of a given scale to the opposite extreme. "The intensity of the conflict is determined by the willpower of the three-dimensional individual who is the protagonist." Before a crisis occurs, every other possibility must be removed. A piece basically describes a crisis from beginning to end, including its inherent dissolution.

### **Creation of a drama:**

Egri emphasizes that the creative process in making a play or a film is the same. He adds, however, that a one-act play in the theater only needs one set, while an hour-long film requires three or four. Information on film-related criteria such as camera angle and position are not part of the author's area of responsibility.

The creation of a drama can, but need not, begin with the formulation of the premise. Often the impulse for writing is a situation, a simple thought or a character. A deeper occupation with the psychological, sociological and physiological properties of the acting person leads to the reaction of his environment, which in turn creates a new situation before which the acting person is placed. The result is a rough synopsis. The premise can be derived from it. The preparatory work is finished when the premise has been formulated.

As an example, Egri gives a synopsis that follows the development of a middle-class girl from a suburb to a prostitute in a big city. The tragic course of action develops beginning with the girl's high ambition paired with pride and the unrealistic goal in life of becoming a dancer (that covers all three dimensions: physical attributes: the girl is attractive. Sociological attributes:

she comes from a lower class background. And finally psychological traits: she is ambitious, haughty and unrealistic) The premise to be derived is "Pride comes before the fall."

A clearly formulated premise, which can be related to every conflict in the plot, guarantees stringency and thus the possibility of a satisfactory resolution: "The moment you decide on a premise, you and your characters become its slaves."

The author must be absolutely convinced of the truth of the premise, since portraying a superficial belief will neither provide convincing motivations of the characters nor resultant convincing conflicts.

If the premise turns out to be inappropriate or the writer's opinion has changed in the course of writing, one must modify the premise or formulate a new one, because the intention of the author must remain to prove the premise with the aid of the story. A premise can be based on emotion, but this emotion must be reasonably motivated in the drama. (Eg in Shakespeare's Othello: "Jealousy leads to the destruction of the object of passion and oneself.") Neither the plot nor the characters may become mere instruments of the premise, otherwise the piece has a didactic effect. Plot, character and premise form a unit in which no part can be more important than the whole.

The characters' environment and its interactions with the character are determining factors. The smallest disturbance of a well-ordered life can lead to a mental-emotional upheaval of the character. Likewise, a character's decision must always have an effect on the environment. The only thing you really know about human nature is that it changes.

Before starting the scene design, all dimensions of the character must be explored and the premise as a conflict must be well anchored in the character. Contrasts within the characters guarantee conflicts. Without opposition there is no conflict, without conflict there is no piece. A playwright needs characters who are not only willing to fight for their beliefs, but who also have the strength to lead that fight to its consistent conclusion. A weak character is one who does not have the strength to fight, or one who cannot make a decision to act for fear of conflict. Only conflict can provoke further conflict. The first conflict is triggered by a purposeful will, the direction of which was determined by the premise of the piece. E.g. it is the Blanches goal in Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire to escape reality. It thus fulfills the first part of the premise of the piece "Every illusion is punished by life." Even an ostensibly passive character can pursue his goal (see Cary Grant in Hitchcock's North by Northwest, for example). He will grow with the resistances as the piece progresses.

Once the protagonist has been formulated, the composition of the other characters will be established. The unity of the opposites must be guaranteed by the diametrical opposition of protagonist and antagonist: both achieve their goal only if they prevent the other from achieving it. An uncompromising attitude is a prerequisite for conflict. The introduction to the dramatic situation and the characters should take place as soon as possible. There are various possibilities for the "point of attack" of a piece: A piece can begin when a conflict leads to a crisis (e.g. Kramer vs Kramer) or when a character has reached a turning point in his life (Groundhog Day). Likewise, the piece can begin with a decision that creates a conflict

(Psycho) or a situation in which something very important is at stake (Green Card). The conflict should be prepared at the beginning by a clever foreshadowing in order to build up all further steps logically. In Ibsen's *The Dollhouse*, for example, Helmer censures Nora for her little sins in the very first scene. The viewer now knows that their "real crime" of forging signatures will shake their relationship to its foundations. In every piece there is a great movement from one state to another, such as from love to hate. In order to avoid the sudden jump of a conflict, the character's journey from the initial stage to the crisis must run in stages (e.g. from friendship-disappointment, disappointment-anger, anger-threat, threat-warning, to warning-murder;) The dialogue grows out of character and conflict. Its function is to reveal the character and to continue the plot. To this end, every dialogue should represent the product of the speaker's three dimensions (using the example from *Chinatown*: "I don't get tough with anyone, Mr. Gittes. My lawyer does." This shows Evelyn Mulwray's psychological attitude as well as her economic background) The dialogue in the drama does not reflect life but the essence of life. "Art is selective, not photographic." The language style must correspond to the social milieu and the character's traits. "Good dialogue is the product of carefully selected characters that grows in dialectical form until the slowly rising conflict proves the premise."

### **Chinatown according to the rules of Egri:**

The underlying premise of the film, which sums up the structure, the conflict and the end of the story, is: "Greed, once unleashed becomes uncontrollable." Greed is excessive desire, desire, lust, passion, insatiability, striving or longing. Noah Cross embodies this greed. The masses of water in which Gittes almost perished at the end of the exposure depict the unleashing as a foreshadowing. Noah Cross, however, went much further in his moral and human lack of boundaries. He made his own daughter his lover. This triggers a series of actions, some well in the past, like the birth of Evelyn Mulwray's daughter / sister, some just recently, like the death of Hollis Mulwray. The "point of attack" is when Noah Cross instructs Gittes via the fake Mrs. Mulwray to expose Hollis Mulwray and his "lover." Cross does this because he wants to destroy Hollis because Hollis contests his "property," his daughter. Cross doesn't expect Gittes to be an upright moralist knight behind the façade of the disillusioned P.I.. Gittes, whose longing for justice lay idle for years after the tragedy in *Chinatown*, awakens to new life with the help of his equal opponent Noah Cross and sets off into battle. Greed is also the predominant motive in Gittes' life : Gittes is greedy for revenge. He feels that back in the day, in *Chinatown*, he didn't get a fair shake and he is still out for the 'big wigs' who framed him back then. And Noah Cross is the biggest of them all. The ultimate boon.

Thus, Noah Cross holds the role of the central character and thus the actual protagonist, because he is the linchpin of the entire story, without him it would not exist. Greed is Cross' essential character trait. Although Noah Cross is late and rarely seen on screen himself, Gittes is constantly busy overcoming obstacles that Cross has built up. From about the middle of the plot he is busy with his unmasking. The viewer recognizes Cross together with Gittes through the investigations of the private detective and through the revelations of his daughter Evelyn regarding the incestuous drive. Cross' greed is not just a thirst for life but claims

immortality. When Gittes asks Cross what the construction of a dam would bring, Cross replied: "The future!" His urge to absorb the future is also expressed in his incestuous desire to plant his "seed" in his daughter / granddaughter. Cross greed to own everything, to be omnipotent, makes him rule like a god. With his land speculation he absorbs the valley, he lets Hollis and the fake Mrs. Mulwray be killed, destroys the lives of his two daughters and decides on the water, symbol of life. As shown above, Gittes is perfectly positioned against Cross as a fighter against amorality. The world can only exist according to the law of one of the two men. Evelyn's whole life consists of avoidance, illusion, imprisonment, flight and fear: as a young girl she fled from him to Mexico. She was unable to visit the child she gave birth to there for years after she returned to America in order not to be reminded of her father's deed. Her marriage to Hollis was an escape into an illusory world. Her numerous affairs and her lies reveal her as someone who lives a great lie and does not want to face the facts. Gittes forces her to tell the truth, and to see the truth, that her father killed her husband. But she cannot shake off her fear. Evelyn does not trust Gittes enough, for fear of her father's greed she sees no other way out than to flee again. She finally gives up in front of her father's omnipotence with her last words to Gittes: "He owns the police." She is unable to kill her father, her shot only grazes him. Her last escape with her daughter leads to her death.

Cross is the rampant greed, his daughter the victim, Gittes the opposite pole. But Gittes also has a greed, for justice, and he has a triggering moment in the past, his earlier failure in Chinatown. There he was humiliated, his honor was trampled. Now he is ready to make any sacrifice to get revenge for it. The fact that someone is kidding him with a fake customer hits exactly this nerve and is therefore the ideal "point of attack." His curiosity (greed) is aroused, as a foreshadowing it gives him a slit nose at the beginning of the film. This points to the end: Gittes will be injured again (in his pride) in his attempt to overcome the earlier injury. His greed makes him blind to dangers: Gittes believes he can take on Cross alone, and at least convict him of the murder of Hollis Mulwray. This blindness led to the destruction of a life once before: the woman he loved and wanted to protect in Chinatown had to die. Evelyn is the second woman he cannot protect. Gittes is the protagonist (not the central character, that's Cross) whose goal, according to the premise, is not achievable (The greed that is uncontrollable is Cross' greed).

Gittes is a three-dimensional character: he attaches great importance to attention (his clothes are always noticeable), which makes him a target. He is an outsider who purposely puts himself outside the social context, which makes him weak because he has no friends. And he succumbs to his greed for justice, which makes him fight battles in which he has to fail, making him even the henchman of destruction: Gittes leads Cross to his daughter and granddaughter and thus ensures their destruction. Because of his blindness, Gittes cannot read Lieutenant Escobar like any other character. Escobar doggedly pursues Gittes because he has long since surrendered to the power of Cross: his career is more important to him than the truth. Gittes' arrest scene lets him realize too late that he should never have allowed himself to fight alone. The following confrontation between Noah and his daughter and granddaughter comes when Gittes is defeated. Evelyn realizes that, as she had feared, she has bet on the wrong card again (as before with Hollis). Gittes may not be dead, but Cross

rendered him harmless forever. Gittes will not recover from this humiliation. Evelyn is therefore only able to flee to death.

Cross is the clear winner. With Evelyn's death, he now has free access to his granddaughter, who will now become the victim of Cross's immortality claim. He covers her eyes because he will determine which reality she will see. In any case, it will not be the light of truthfulness that Gittes wanted to light. In addition, after Gittes' defeat, he can now tackle the construction of the dam unmolested. The "greedy" city of Los Angeles, which will soak up all water, all life and destroy the fertile valley, has won. She cannot see that she will destroy herself in the process, because the valley is also her own livelihood, since she too is "a slave" of the premise.