

Technical Storytelling Analysis for “The Poster” Scene 1

Scene 1 of “The Poster” is a thematically rich exercise of basic storytelling principles, such as withheld revelation, the thematic question technique, subtext, basic tension devices, problem to solve, and scene-level story structure.

Thematic Question Technique: Is there a point to art if you don’t put meaning into it? Chris says no—art has to be inherently meaningful. Mel says yes—the point is the social engagement.

Thematic Juxtaposition Technique: When Chris says this:

What is the difference between a party at a bar where people get together and a play at a theater where people get together? Art. Art comes from who we are as people. It’s an expression of our pains, our sorrows, our joys and our victories. If we make art into a thing that doesn’t have meaning, we devalue who we are as a society.

His thematic position is immediately and abruptly juxtaposed by Mel’s thematic position made abundantly clear in her next line:

I think you should just draw a clock.

This paints both thematic perspectives in their sharpest possible disagreement. Chris’s answer to the question is long-winded, philosophical, and idealistic. Mel’s position is comparatively curt, simplistic, and practical.

Forced Denial Technique: Chris can’t say the real reason he can’t just draw a clock. The entire first 2/3rds of the scene is him trying to cover up what the true problem is. It all comes to a climax when he can’t deny it anymore. Then, suddenly, the mood dramatically changes.

The Choice Technique: Throughout the entire scene, the scene could end extremely easily and quickly if one of them just draws a clock on the poster. It’s a very clear, tangible thing that either does or does not happen. If the clock gets drawn, the story is over. The fact that Chris repeatedly refuses to make that decision reveals his character.

Ticking Clock Technique: Mel repeatedly says she is late to work. This is the reason why the conversation has to happen right now, not a moment later. Also, we soon learn that the poster is due by the next morning. This reinforces the idea that this conversation has to happen now—right now, not later.

Problem to Solve Technique: The entire scene, from the very first line, serves to solve a clear, tangible problem that either is or is not solved. Either the poster gets made, or it doesn't. This type of problem is not so complicated that it takes 2 hours to solve, but it isn't so simple that it can't sustain a single scene.

Withheld Revelation Technique: Throughout the entire beginning, Chris is hiding the deeply consequential secret about the real reason he can't make the poster. In the first half, the scene was a dry, philosophical debate about the meaning of art. After the revelation, we suddenly learn the scene is actually about a deeply impressionable kid trying to impress a mentor figure. This quickly leads to a new mission: how to get out of this situation without losing the teacher's confidence. This also serves as a Raising Stakes technique.

Synecdoche Principle of Characterization: The entire second half of the scene serves to establish synecdoche for the theatre teacher character. Before we see the character, we are shown the impact that she has had on other people. We see little hints at who she is long before we see her face. While this is not a perfect example of the principle in its purest form (because it isn't tangible symbols of the person), it serves to build characterization specifically before the character's face is shown.

Scene-level Story Structure

Individual scenes should typically follow a recognizable, but shortened version of the global story beats. Several beats will be skipped and some will be combined. The basic structure is this: Exposition, Inciting Incident, Climax/All Hope is Lost, Revelation, Forward. Every multi-minute sequence should have some form of this basic pattern.

Prologue: Scene 1 of *The Poster* is a prologue in the larger stage play. Its job, along with all other prologues, is to establish the story's danger level, among other things. This scene establishes the story's danger level by showing Chris's emotional vulnerability. The scene also primes the danger that happens in scene 2, where the theatre teacher character yells at Chris for not completing the poster. While scene 1 could be cut from the narrative and the story would still make sense, the scene is important because it establishes danger level and shows us why the inciting incident in scene 2 is particularly troubling for our character. If it was just some teacher yelling at some student, the audience wouldn't care. However, because of this prologue, we know why that incident in scene 2 matters to Chris, and so we care.

Exposition: Within the scene, the exposition is when Chris explains exactly what the problem is. The exposition ends when Mel decides to sit down and commit to the conversation. In this segment, we learn what he's trying to do, why he's trying to do it, and why he can't seem to do it.

Inciting Incident/Point of No Return: When Mel sits down, she commits to having a more in-depth conversation. By doing that, she promises the audience that something will have to change before she gets back up.

All Hope is Lost: Right before the revelation, the scene is extremely close to ending in the worst way possible. Mel is extremely close to leaving without helping solve the problem, without understanding why Chris is so obsessed with the poster. We come very close to seeing all the setups not be paid off.

Revelation: Suddenly, one small thing happens and everything changes. Here, the entire direction of the scene dramatically shifts once Chris is compelled to reveal the personal, embarrassing secret behind his dilemma. Once this is revealed, it sets up a new mission.

Forward: The scene can't end until something tangible has happened that will directly impact or cause the next scene. Here, we know this scene is complete when they decide that Mel will accompany Chris when he talks to the teacher tomorrow morning. If that detail at the end wasn't there, the scene would ultimately serve no clear purpose.