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***Up*: A Study on Narrative Structure**

Since their first feature *Toy Story* in 1995, Pixar Animation Studios has had a long streak of mostly acclaimed and commercially successful films, and the company philosophy that they have constantly held is: "Story is King." Their 2009 film *Up* is no exception. The film is a rather unconventional story of an old man and young boy who go on an adventure to the jungles of Venezuela and find a talking dog, a thirteen-foot-tall colored bird, and an old explorer out for blood. But these quirks are met with the story structure and narrative elements of so many films before it so that the end result is a beautiful, funny, exciting, and heartfelt piece.

Up follows a standard three-act structure, but from the very beginning, it takes a unique approach to presenting the story and main character. We open somewhere in the early twentieth century, where young Carl Frederickson watches his idol, explorer Charles Muntz, in a newsreel. This two-minute scene sets up all the exposition needed to establish who Muntz is, what Paradise Falls is, why Muntz is there, and why Carl wants to go there himself. The following scene establishes Carl as our main character, as we see him playing in the neighborhood pretending to be like Muntz.

The exposition continues as Carl meets Ellie and discovers her mutual love for Paradise Falls. They promise to travel there together someday, forming a bond that leads to marriage and a long, mostly happy life together that we see in silent montage for several minutes. This sequence establishes why Carl and Ellie have no children, why they never were able to go to Paradise Falls, and why Carl has all those balloons in the first place as a balloon man at the zoo. Finally, when Carl and Ellie have grown old, Carl finally buys tickets to Paradise Falls before

Ellie has to be hospitalized, leading to her passing away. By minute twelve, the audience has seen Carl grow up, and it's almost as if the film could have stopped here and it would have made a heartfelt short film.

But in fact, what we've just seen is only the "setup" to the real story. Then we are thrown into Carl's present situation: he's widowed, crabby, and resistant to all the noisy construction going on around his neighborhood. If what we've just seen is "setup", then the "inciting incident" could be the construction workers trying to get Carl out of the neighborhood. Carl, of course, resists this: he scoffs at the Shady Oaks Retirement Home literature in his mailbox, and he verbally insults the workers. This establishes Carl's current living situation, but it also shows clear character traits that will change over the course of the story. He hasn't truly let go of Ellie yet (he even talks to her as if she's still alive), he disrespects and distrusts the people around him, and he refuses to leave his home, as if he's given up entirely on moving on with life.

As the film progresses, we not only meet Russell, a very important secondary character with the established goal of becoming a Senior Wilderness Explorer, but we also come to the point around minute eighteen when Carl has to go to court for physically attacking a construction worker. That night, he goes back home with literature from Shady Oaks, showing us what his fate is. This is Carl's "point of no return", when he realizes what his fate will be and then remembers his promise to Ellie to get them to Paradise Falls. By crossing his heart like they did when they were kids, we see that he is in fact going to take up the "call to adventure".

The next day, before he can be taken away, Carl launches all his balloons from his chimney, lifting his house off the ground and steering it to Paradise Falls and beginning the film's second act. From its start, there are a lot of ups and downs—at first, more downs than ups. Carl finds Russell on his porch. The two of them get stuck in a heavy storm. They find themselves drifting lower into a foggy, rocky area and just barely get the house on solid ground before approaching a cliff.

But then the fog clears, and Carl realizes, about one-third of the way through the film, that they have reached beautiful Paradise Falls. This is the “first attempt” in the story, Carl realizing that he has made it to his destination... and then realizing he’s on the opposite side of the falls. He reluctantly sets off with Russell on foot to get to the falls before the helium runs out of the balloons. This raises the stakes of the story, presenting the fact that there is now a time limit to get to Paradise Falls before they cannot walk any longer.

Act two continues and presents several new characters and plot points. Kevin, a thirteen-foot-tall female bird, shows up around minute thirty-five, and while Carl wants nothing to do with her, Russell invites her along on their journey. Kevin’s subplot and goal is unclear at first, but gradually we learn that the reason she calls out into the forest and gathers food is because she has a nest of babies. At minute forty, we meet Dug, a dog with a collar allowing him to speak English as well as a goal of his own. Once Carl (reluctantly) lets Dug join their group, Dug starts treating him like his master, which will not only help Carl through unfamiliar territory as Dug guides him, but it also lets us identify more with Dug through the story because we can see his goal: to please his new master. And while these scenes are played for comedic effect, there are still moments when we are reminded of the stakes as we see other dogs, more sinister-looking ones, looking for Dug and the bird elsewhere.

That night, as the four of them try to rest, Carl learns more about Russell’s family life and his estranged relationship with his father. This is a huge point in Carl’s character arc of opening up to other people, especially those he never thought he would care about. Carl is forced to become a father figure for Russell, which isn’t something he’s ever been or prepared to be. This raises the stakes of the story, as Carl is challenged emotionally like he never has been before. The next morning, the sinister dogs find the group and lead them away to an unknown location, but when they get there, Carl realizes he has nothing to fear: they have been led right to the location of Charles Muntz!

This event, although occurring around minute fifty-five of the ninety-six minute film, is arguably the film's "midpoint", where Carl gets to meet his hero and interacts with him at dinner. But then things start to go downhill when he realizes that Muntz has killed people previously who had come to Paradise Falls after the bird that Muntz has been after for decades. Because Carl and Russell stumbled upon the bird—Kevin—by accident, Carl realizes they have to go before it's too late. Now, the stakes have been raised even higher: the lives of all four of our heroes, Carl being the primary character and Russell, Kevin, and Dug being more secondary, hang in the balance.

After an exciting chase scene that successfully leads the group out of Muntz's hideout but results in Kevin's leg being injured, the group walks through the night to find Kevin's babies in their nest, bringing us to about sixty-five minutes into the film. As they walk, Russell talks to Carl more about his life and fun times with his dad. Now that these two characters have been through a life-threatening experience, they start to form a stronger bond. Carl listens to Russell much more than he did at the start of the film, and Russell has gone from reciting Wilderness Explorer talk to revealing his home life to Carl. There is a definite change in character at this point, and it culminates into a positive event as they lead Kevin to her babies.

Unfortunately, Muntz interrupts them, having tracked Dug via his collar, and he captures Kevin after setting a small fire to Carl's house. Carl goes to put the fire out and is therefore helpless to rescue Kevin, and Russell accuses him of just letting Kevin go. Here is the most tension yet in the film, as Carl protests against Russell and accuses Dug of getting them into the whole situation. Carl decides to take his house to the falls whether or not he is helped, and the next morning, they arrive by the waterfall just as the house can no longer float. Here is a powerful moment: Carl has gotten what he really wanted at the start, and what he promised Ellie, to get their house to Paradise Falls. But he has done so at the cost of hurting those in his life who cared about him. Because he has not succeeded in achieving his character arc, this could be

considered the “lowest point” of the film. Russell angrily tosses his merit badges on the ground and goes to sit by himself, and Dug is nowhere to be seen.

But when Carl goes to rest inside his house (now with furniture and miscellaneous items scattered around, perhaps symbolizing Carl’s current inner turmoil), he opens his photo album of Paradise Falls that he and Ellie created long ago and discovers that, to his surprise, Ellie secretly filled the rest of the album with pictures of their life together. At the end, she wrote: “Thanks for the adventure—now go have a new one!” This, occurring around minute seventy-three, encourages Carl to make amends and ultimately achieve the goal and the character change that he really needs. He goes outside and discovers that Russell has tied balloons to himself and used Carl’s leaf blower to fly away alone and rescue Kevin, propelling us into the third act. Carl realizes that in order to be able to get to Russell, he is going to have to empty his house of all his heavy belongings, literally and metaphorically leaving parts of his past behind and revealing his character arc being achieved: Carl is now able to let go of the past, move on with life, and save his friends. At minute seventy-five, when Carl finds Dug on his porch and welcomes him back, this further reveals Carl’s change in character, but it also gives closure to Dug, who has felt bad about getting his master into all this trouble and asks for forgiveness.

As the third act progresses, Russell gets closer and closer to Kevin, and Carl and Dug get closer to Russell, and each of their lives is at stake more than once. The stakes of the film that have been established throughout the film, from Carl and Russell’s relationship to Kevin’s fate to even these characters’ lives, culminate in the eight minutes that make up this last action sequence. The “climax” occurs when all five of these main characters, Carl, Russell, Kevin, Dug, and Muntz, are all together on top of Muntz’s ship. Muntz is determined to get his bird whatever the costs, Carl is hanging on to his house by the garden hose, and the others are hiding inside the house.

Ultimately, Carl rescues the three inside, and Muntz falls to his death. This leads to the “resolution”, where the four remaining characters are happily reunited on the ship. Carl now watches his house float away and disappear in the clouds—but because he has now bonded with his new friends, he is able to say: “It’s just a house.” They use Muntz’s ship to deliver Kevin back to her babies, giving this subplot appropriate closure, and get back home, where Carl pins on Russell’s final Wilderness Explorer badge. This shows both Carl and Russell’s character arcs completed: at the start of the film, neither character would fully let the other in emotionally. Now, however, Carl has fully stepped in willingly as a father figure for Russell, and Russell, while now having completed his goal of being a Senior Wilderness Explorer, now has something even more meaningful: a man to be there for him in his life. The final shot, wrapping up just at minute eighty-nine, reveals that not only does Carl now have this new bond with someone he wouldn’t have even talked to at the beginning of the film, but that his house ended up on Paradise Falls after all. This shows visually that Carl Frederickson has now gotten both what he wanted and what he really needed.

Up uses so many unconventional elements to tell its story: an old man using balloons to sail his house to Venezuela, accompanied by a young boy scout, a dog with a talking collar, and a humongous bird, who find a fellow explorer hiding out in the rocks who has become protective of his hunt for success for so long that he will do anything to get there first. Not only are these unlikely protagonists, but they are also extremely unlikely to end up working together. But *Up* tells their story in a way that fits a sound story structure and helps us bond with them in the same way that the characters in the film bond with each other. By creating unlikely yet very relatable characters and revealing the narrative in some ways traditionally and in some ways very uniquely, *Up* becomes a great example of how to tell a truly heartfelt story.

Sources

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