

EPISODE 022

The Most Important Element of a Story that Works – How to Show a Change between Beginning and Ending

See the show notes at storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-022

[00:00:00] Hey, this is Melanie Naumann, and welcome to the Stories in Songs Podcast.

This is another bite-sized episode about one specific aspect of telling stories, and especially of telling stories in lyrics.

Honestly, you're about to learn about one of the most important aspects that decide if you have a story or if it's just a sequence of events where nothing happens at all.

You might already know what I mean: Stories are about change.

In each episode, I'm saying, "Stories are about change. Stories are about change."

But what does "Change" actually mean?

How can we end differently than we started?

How can we show how our plot progresses?

And how can we keep listeners engaged?

Well, in today's bite-sized episode, you'll discover how you can use that crucial element of storytelling for writing more captivating lyrics.

Are you ready?

Let's get started.



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TEASER

Recap

[00:01:29] Today, we talk about one crucial element of storytelling.

Change.

That's the big one.

Stories are about change.

In the last episode, we talked about the crucial elements of storytelling. Let me name them again for you so that you can see where that crucial component fits in:

We said in a story, you need:

1. a main character
2. who wants something
3. and has to overcome obstacles
4. because there's something important at stake for him
5. And they'll have to make a sacrifice to get what they want
6. And the story must end in a different way than how it's started
7. And in the best-case-scenario, even the character changed from the beginning to the ending
8. And through that external and internal change – which refers to the character's situation and his internal values – the story delivers a meaningful message that helps the audience to survive, thrive, or derive meaning for their own lives.

Change in Stories

[00:02:27] As you can see, the element of change affects not only how the plot progresses and the development of the story's character – that means how a person changes internally considering their worldview – but that external and internal change also forms the message of the story, the big takeaway.

If there's no change, you got no story.



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Just listen to [episode 20](#). In that episode, we analyze the storytelling power of the song “Kiss Me Slowly” by Parachute. There is no change in those lyrics. Nothing changes. The character and his situation stay the same from beginning to end. If nothing changes, you’re risking only repeating yourself, and the song won’t have a message for the listener. That’s what happened in “Kiss Me Slowly.” So make sure you check out episode 20 to see the huge impact that no plot progression can have.

So in today’s episode, we talk about what change is and how you can make sure that your lyrics end differently than they started. Because ultimately, that’s what we mean when we talk about a plot that progresses.

What is a plot?

[00:03:37] In storytelling, it’s always about the plot.

But what is a plot?

Some say the plot is character.

And you’re absolutely on the money with that assumption.

A story is about a certain conscious being that is trying to achieve something – a certain goal. Remember, that goal or WANT or Object of Desire is another crucial element of storytelling, the same as having a character.

And the plot progresses by that character’s decisions when confronted with binary choices where they have something to lose or gain with each of those two options. That means when we include the stakes.

Only then, and I mean only then when the character makes this hard decision between two best bad choices or an irreconcilable goods choice, does the story move forward.

So a story is all about character and it’s the actions of the character that move the plot forward.

Still, you might wonder, even if you include some stakes and a character who makes a decision, how can you be sure that something has actually changed – changed the character’s situation or his worldview?

Well, to grasp the entire concept of CHANGE, let’s look at an example.



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First, I'd like to tell you how I got my coffee this morning.

This morning, I woke up. I got up, put on my slippers, walked down the stairs. Then, I went to the coffee machine, put a filter in, put some coffee in the filter, poured water into the machine, and pushed the button. Lo and behold, in about three minutes, I had a cup of coffee.

What did you think of that story?

Was it interesting?

Was it a story at all?

It was more like an irrelevant description of a series of steps, right? Like "How to Make Coffee with a Coffee Machine - A step by step guide".

What do you think was missing?

Nothing happened, right?

Every step listed made absolutely no difference. I could have also just said: I made some coffee in the morning today.

And you still would not care.

Because nothing worth mentioning happened.

Nothing happened at all.

So in order to tell a story, something needs to happen, right?

And we can even be more specific:

Something unexpected must happen. Something, the character did not see coming.

We'll come back to that unexpected event in another episode. For now, just remember: Something needs to happen in a story. Something that comes as a surprise. Something unexpected.

Beginning - CHANGE - Ending

[00:06:20] Let's stay with what makes a story work for now.



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And the very first thing we all need to know about stories is that you need be able to sum up the story by answering three simple questions.

These questions are:

1. How does the story start?
2. How does it end?
3. What happened between the beginning and the end that shows the external situation and/or the character's worldview has changed for better or worse?

These are the questions that will determine whether your text uses the power of storytelling or whether it's just about ... well, nothing really.

Answering questions 1 and 2 (How does the story start and how does it end) will be fairly easy. But question 3 is the trick question.

Let's look at it like this:

If everything stays the same, there is no story.

You could argue that I had no coffee at the beginning of the scene, and I had coffee at the end of the scene.

But then you've ignored the other crucial components of storytelling. We not only need a character who wants something, but we also need to put obstacles and, most importantly, stakes in the game. And at one point, something happens that throws the character into a crisis situation where they are at a crossroads.

Remember: Stories are about change.

Something has to happen that changes the situation for the characters, or even the character himself.

In this sense, the state of the world within a story is different at the end than it was at the beginning.

And in the case of the protagonist, the change should be irreversible throughout the story. We expect the characters we care about to face great challenges and come out of them with new insights or better knowledge.

How we act or don't act when faced with conflict is what drives storytelling.

That's why question 3 is a trick question.



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Whenever you think about what has changed between the beginning and the ending of your song's story, consider the crucial components of storytelling. They have to be present as well to have a story.

That means:

1. Do you have a main character?
2. What do they want?
3. Do they have to overcome a challenge or solve a certain problem?
4. And is there's something important at stake if they win or lose?
5. What kind of sacrifice do they have to make to get what they want?
6. And only then, if you have those elements, you can think about how your story ends in a different way than how it's started.
7. And in the best-case scenario, even the character changed from the beginning to the ending.
8. And through that external and internal change – which refers to the character's situation and internal values – the story delivers a meaningful message that helps the audience survive, thrive, or derive meaning for their own lives.

Story Example: The Lion King

[00:09:21] Before we dive into some song examples, let's look at a movie that everyone knows to understand how change works in the global story and its smaller units.

Let's look at the story of "The Lion King." 🎬 Especially, let's look at the story of the main antagonist, Scar.

1. How does the story start for Scar?
 - Scar is alive but he ain't a king.
2. How does the story end for Scar?
 - Scar falls as a king and dies.
3. What happened in between that shows that the external situation and/or the character's worldview has changed for better or worse between the beginning and the end?
 - Simba returned to take back what's rightfully his.

That's Scar's story summed up in short. And you can clearly see what's at stake for Scar: It's a story about life and death, as well as his social standing. He rises and falls. And what happened in between? That's what Simba's story is all about.



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But even if we look at the very first scene of “The Lion King,” we are already introduced to what’s going on for Scar.

1. How does the scene start for Scar?
 - Scar could eat both the mouse and Zazu.
2. How does the story end for Scar?
 - Scar is rebuked by the king and reminded of where his place is.
3. What happened between the beginning and ending that shows the external situation and/or the character’s worldview has changed for better or worse?
 - King Mufasa orders Scar to let go of Zazu.

So even in that little scene, you get introduced to a lion whose impotence is masked by power. Remember, Scar could have eaten the mouse and Zazu. He had more power over them. But because Mufasa entered the scene, Scar loses his fake power and is actually shown powerless. In this case, Mufasa is the event that happened and changed the situation for Scar.

I hope looking at this example helped you grasp a better understanding of that event that happens between beginning and ending that causes the change of the situation or the character’s worldview.

In future episodes, we’ll talk about that event in more detail.

For now, remember, it’s just important that you pay attention if something changes at all. That’s so crucial when we want to use the power of storytelling in writing lyrics.

Song Examples that Show Change

[00:12:10] Now, let’s look at a few examples to see how the storytelling element of change works in some well-known songs.

“I’m A Believer” by The Monkees

[00:12:18] Let’s start with “I’m A Believer” by The Monkees. All we need to know here is to look at the first line of the song, the last line of the song, and the first line of the chorus, and we got our three questions answered.

Let’s go through them:



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1. How does the song start?
 - *"I thought love was only true in fairy tales."*
2. How does it end?
 - *"I'm A Believer"*
3. What happened between the beginning and the end that shows that the external situation and/or the character's worldview has changed for better or worse?
 - *"Then I saw her face."*

And that's it.

If you want to find out more about this amazing evergreen song and how it uses the power of storytelling, listen to [episode 13](#) of the Stories in Songs Podcast.

Let's look at some more song examples:

"Love Again" by Dua Lipa

[00:13:01]

1. How does the song start?
 - *"I never thought that I would find a way out."*
2. How does the song end?
 - *"You got me in love again."*
3. What happened between the beginning and the end that shows that the external situation and/or the character's worldview has changed for better or worse?
 - *"Never have I ever met somebody like you."*

Isn't that interesting? You can even use an existing idea and wrap it into your own story. In the case of "Love Again", the story sounds oddly familiar when we talk about it straight after the Monkees' song "I'm A Believer". But again, there are so many love stories out there that have this central idea at its core, and still, the storytellers are able to keep innovating that idea. And so can you.

"Love Again" is certainly a very great song that shows an amazing change in the character's situation and the way they see the world.

If you like that song, you should also check out [episode 194 of Song Exploder](#). You can even watch it on Netflix under the same name: Song Exploder. They talk about how that song came to be. I'll include a link in the show notes.

Let's look at another example:



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“Good Riddance / Time of Your Life” by Green Day

[00:14:21] Again, I’ll use the quotes from the lyrics to answer our three questions:

1. How does the song start?
 - *“Another turning point, a fork stuck in the road”*
2. How does the song end?
 - *“I hope you had the time of your life”*
3. What happened between the beginning and the end that shows that the external situation and/or the character’s worldview has changed for better or worse?
 - *“It’s not a question, but a lesson learned in time”*

In “Good Riddance” by Green Day, you can clearly see how the character’s worldview has changed. Even though life is about challenges and turning points, you still have to enjoy life. But you can only recognize what life truly means when you’ve learned that lesson. Amazing lyrics.

“I’d Do Anything for Love” by Meat Loaf

[00:15:05] Let’s look at another example:

1. How does the song start?
 - *“And I would do anything for love,”*
2. How does the song end?
 - *“No, I won’t do that”*
3. What happened between the beginning and the end that shows that the external situation and/or the character’s worldview has changed for better or worse?
 - She says: *“And sooner or later you’ll be screwing around”*

I love that song by Meat Loaf. It’s so amazing. But before I get lost in talking only about that song – cause we certainly could and will later at one point in this podcast – let’s stick with our three questions. The song’s main character is willing to do so much for her love, but at one point she understands his willingness to do anything for love and so she thinks he’d be screwing around. And that’s the big revelation of that song. That’s why he always says: “But I won’t do that.” Very strong song and you can certainly see how the character has changed from who she thought he still was to who he is now because he has found his one true love. He’d do anything for her love. Just for her.



“You Asked for This” by Halsey

[00:16:23]

1. How does the song start?
 - *“I don't know what you want from me”*
2. How does the song end?
 - *“But I want everything I asked for”*
3. What happened between the beginning and the end that shows that the external situation and/or the character's worldview has changed for better or worse?
 - *“Go on and be a big girl
You asked for this now”*

In that song, the singer talks to herself. It's all about her own maturation process. And you can see quite well, that in the end, she not only embraces the good but also the bad. She accepts the consequences of her actions. She wants everything she's asked for – even involuntarily asked for. Because that's what growing up is all about. So that song is mostly about the internal worldview shift of the song's character – a very important internal change.

“To Be Loved” by Adele

[00:17:19] Lastly, let's look at one more example.

1. How does the song start?
 - *“I built a house for love to grow”*
2. How does the song end?
 - *“Let it be known that I tried”*
3. What happened between the beginning and the end that shows that the external situation and/or the character's worldview has changed for better or worse?
 - *“Let it be known that I will choose to lose”*

In Adele's song, she really underlines the crucial component of having to make a sacrifice. She's talking about that house she's built for her love, but ultimately she ended up hanging on to something that made her feel bad. She thought she couldn't live without him, but she chooses to let go of all the things that she can't live without. So even if it's hard, she's sophisticated enough to see the world in all its shades of grey. She has changed as a person. She even states in the first verse that “I was so young that it was hard to know” – with that line she refers to her naive worldview.

So “To Be Loved” is another great song that uses the external problem of a breakup to really emphasize the character's maturation process – the character's internal worldview shift.



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[00:18:32] Alright, I hope you have a better understanding of how to find out if something has changed in the lyrics' story – referring to the character's situation or the way they see the world. In future episodes, we'll talk more about that moment of change and how you can get better at identifying it, what other elements support it to create change, and how you can apply it to your own lyric writing.

For now, make sure to keep an eye out for lyrics that show the change of the character's situation or the shift in how they look at the world. Of course, you won't find that shift in every song, but those songs that use the power of storytelling will certainly have it.

Remember, when it comes to stories, they are not static. They are not mere descriptions or step-by-step descriptions of how to do something. Stories are about change.

But we can even get more specific about what exactly needs to change.

Tune in to our next bite-sized episode to find out how you can use universal human values as inspiration to find amazing topics to write about. So you don't have to write just about love, but you know where to look to find other possibilities to write about things that also interest and engage people.

Please subscribe, if you don't wanna miss our next episode.

Until then, tschüß und auf wiedersehen, as we Germans say.

Show Notes

- Stories in Songs FREE 3-part-video-series: <https://storypower.storiesinsongs.com/>
- Episode 20 – “Kiss Me Slowly”: <https://storiesinsongs.com/podcast/episode-020/>
- Song Exploder: <https://songexploder.net/dua-lipa>

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