Seger Notes #1: THE AFRICAN QUEEN

Screenplay by James Agee, John Huston, and Peter Viertel
Based on the novel by C. S. Forester
Directed by John Huston
Academy Award, Best Adapted Screenplay

The African Queen is one of my favorite classic films. For many years there were few good female roles, where the woman was pushing the action, had a will of her own, and was still open to transformation and adventure and new experiences. Rosie, played by the remarkable Katharine Hepburn, has true grit and determination. I know I would enjoy having her as a friend, and if I had to go on a challenging adventure with someone, I would put Rosie near the top of my list. She is intrepid from the very beginning. I love this quality, and I rarely see it in a film.

The African Queen has all the elements of a great road movie (sometimes called the journey film or the trek film)—although without the road, but with a very long river and a big lake. The structure is classic, basic, and easy to follow. Like another of my favorite films, *Witness*, this is a film to watch if you want to learn screenwriting structure. (I have written about *Witness* in detail in *Making a Good Script Great*.)

The African Queen also deals with structural problems that you might be facing in your own screenwriting. It balances a primary personal story with a larger-world story, since this river adventure is set against the backdrop of the First World War. It takes us into a very unfamiliar world. For most of the film, there are only two characters on-screen: two strong roles, with range and depth and emotional nuance, which attracted two great actors.

When I chose this film, I had just begun working with the publishers of this series. One of the publishers, Allegra Huston, is the daughter of John Huston, the director

and co-screenwriter of *The African Queen*. This gave me even more of a reason to honor him by discussing this great film!

The Basic Classic Structure

Usually, when I teach, I discuss the classic three-act structure: the beginning (Act 1), the middle (Act 2), and the end (Act 3). The Set-Up, about 10–15 minutes long, establishes the context, presents a problem or a need, and includes the catalyst, a dramatic event which starts the story. A First Turning Point moves the story in a new direction. Act 2 explores the conflict and develops the relationships and the story before a Second Turning Point moves the story into Act 3, where there is usually an urgency to achieve the goal quickly. Most films have a Big Finish—a dramatic action which resolves the problem.

The Set-Up of *The African Queen* establishes a very specific world. It is 1914, the beginning of the First World War, and the Germans occupy part of Africa. In an African village, we find the hardworking Rosie, sweaty and determined as she pounds the life out of the pump organ in a little church, while her brother, the Reverend, with equal fervor leads a rather uncommitted congregation through the hymn "Guide Me O Thou Great Redeemer." The Set-Up also introduces Charlie Allnut, who makes periodic deliveries of mail and supplies, chugging up and down the river on his jalopy of a boat, the *African Queen*. He is clearly as uneasy with Rosie and the Reverend as they are with him.

The catalyst that moves the script from context to story occurs at about 10 minutes into the movie. The German army arrives and burns down the huts and the church. Rosie and her brother are left alone.

In the next section of the story, which I call Act 1 Development, we see the aftermath of this event. Rosie tries to hold things together, but her brother goes mad, then dies in a delirium at about 17 minutes into the film. Later that day, Allnut comes by, helps Rosie dig the grave, and suggests that he take her to safety.

In the next sequence, Allnut mentions that a German boat, the *Luisa*, is patrolling the large lake downriver. Rosie gets an idea, and reveals it at a very strong First Turning Point, about 26 minutes into the movie—they could torpedo the *Luisa*. This is called the mission statement and almost all movies have one. It defines the goal—sometimes called the objective or the intention—and it usually occurs either during the Set-Up or at the First Turning Point. Allnut thinks Rosie's idea is simply crazy, and has no interest in it. She accuses him of refusing to help England in the war. He relents, hoping to change her mind later. And they are on their way. Her determination and her will sets down the narrative line which will follow in Act 2.

In Act 2, Rosie and Allnut meet a series of obstacles that threaten their ability to achieve the goal. It rains—hard. They run several big rapids. They see crocodiles. The rudder breaks and needs to be repaired. They have to get past German cannons at Shona, which are placed on a cliff that towers above the river. Finally, they get stuck in the reeds at the delta of the river, with no current and no indication of how to get through into the lake. All hope seems to be gone—until, at the Second Turning Point, they see the *Luisa*.

At the Climax, their mission is achieved. They did it.

Keeping the Story Moving

Like all road movies, the story runs the risk of becoming episodic and repetitive. The brilliance of *The African Queen* lies in its ability to keep the story moving forward while building the relationship between Rosie and Allnut—the only two characters on screen for most of the film. In doing this, the writers use several techniques:

1. Almost every dramatic event is created as a scene sequence with a three-act structure. When you study this film, you can see how each sequence is set up, developed, and paid off. Let's take the Shona sequence as an example. We might say that the Set-Up of this sequence is the first mention of Shona. Act 1

includes Rosie's plan, and Allnut telling her how difficult it is to get past the cliff. At the First Turning Point, the Germans see the boat and begin shooting at them. The conflict and danger comprise Act 2 of the sequence until, at the Second Turning Point, the sun is in the eyes of the Germans and they cannot take their shot. At the end of the third act of the sequence, the boat slips out of sight.

The building of these sequences keeps the film moving forward.

2. The film also keeps its momentum because every time they stop—in order to repair the rudder, or to rest after the rapids, or to get the leeches off, or to have tea—the film shows the story beat when they start again on the next section of their journey. You could actually make a note of each time you realize, "And they're off again!" Playing out the first beat of the next sequence gives an extra push to keep the story moving.

Balancing the Personal and the Bigger Story

Many films have to achieve a balance between the main plot, which gives direction and forward momentum, and the subplots, which are often love stories or other personal stories. Most films spend most of their time on the plot, with the personal stories interweaving and adding dimension. In *The African Queen*, the personal story dominates. Yet, unless we understand the bigger story—the First World War and the German threat—the film would be no more than a series of episodes showing two people falling in love while taking a little jaunt down a river.

Let's first look at the big story. It is 1914. The First World War has begun, and the Germans seem to be everywhere, including in East Africa. (Watch *Out of Africa*, which also takes place in East Africa during the First World War.) Here is a small jungle village, isolated from the rest of the world, and yet the war still profoundly influences these lives. The wartime situation is mentioned in dialogue, and it is reinforced when we hear the soldiers who arrive at the village speaking German. We know the Germans are the enemy. They are violent. They are dangerous. The German story is set up within the first 12 minutes of the film.

This bigger-picture story becomes personal when Rosie's brother dies. How dare this military force kill the good Reverend! Perhaps a character other than Rosie might have wept, returned to civilization, and gone on with her life as a church organist someplace else. But that is not who Rosie is. The bigger-picture story provides her motivation for wanting to sink the *Luisa*, and therefore the whole motivation for the film. So, we need to understand it. We don't need to know a lot. The filmmakers could rely on their audience knowing something about the First World War—at the very least, that the Germans were the enemy—although probably very few people knew how it played out in East Africa. The novelist and the screenwriters had to keep the German enemy present in the story so that we can understand Rosie's motivation to do something that on the surface seems impossible and nonsensical.

During Act 1, we get more information about the Germans. We are told that the *Luisa's* presence on this large lake prevents the British from moving further into German territory. We learn that the Germans have a lookout at Shona to make sure that nobody reaches the lake via the river. When Rosie and Allnut are captured in Act 3, we hear the German language again—and the personal threat to them increases because they are going to be hanged. The danger we have felt all along is now clarified and taken to its extreme. When their objective is gained—the *Luisa* is torpedoed by the sunken *African Queen*—we understand that Rosie and Allnut have played their small part in the bigger story of the war.

Thus, the First World War story is like an umbrella over the personal story. Throughout the film, we are given just enough information to keep that story moving forward, while most of the screen time is devoted to the personal relationship.

The Transformational Story

Almost all journey stories are transformational stories. Like all human beings, characters change. They grow. They move from one attitude to another and from one set of behaviors to another—perhaps something far beyond their usual way of life. This new set of behaviors takes some time to evolve. A transformation can't be so abrupt that it seems out of character and not credible. We have to understand how the character

gets from one point, the character we meet in Act 1, to the character we see at the end of Act 3. They can only get there by going through the struggles and the obstacles of Act 2.

Many writers really hate Act 2. Keeping it moving and developing is a difficult job. And the only way to do that is to think of the process. Drama is about process. It's not just about episodes or things people do. Each scene needs to push a character to move forward, make decisions, allow themselves to be influenced by others, and step up to the plate to face the challenges they are presented with. Is the character up to the task? Is the character somebody who can be influenced? Can this character credibly change and grow?

We change because of the impact of events and other people on our lives. Generally, we don't change just because somebody gives us a sermon. Of course, we may go through changes because someone gives us a piece of advice that we take to heart—but generally that advice is not some long discussion but a few words here and there that click with us. And often those pieces of advice are backed up by a sense that the other person "gets us." Suddenly, there's a moment of realization. In a love story, it's a moment of recognition that the other person has wonderful qualities we never noticed before. That moment allows us to open up and to be awake, which creates a new way of thinking or a new behavior.

The "aha" moment in a transformational story often comes around the Midpoint of the whole movie. The first half of the film presents all sorts of troubles in the relationship. Nothing but conflict. Irritation. Obstacles. Yet, something keeps them together (in this case, the boat) and gives them enough time to form an attachment. (For a similar Act 2 structure, see the animated *Beauty and the Beast*.)

Some films have several moments that are powerful enough to keep moving a character forward. The first big moment in *The African Queen* occurs when they run the first really scary rapids. Allnut expects Rosie to be very afraid, and figures that he will probably need to do all the work. She surprises him and surprises herself. It was a thrill. She says, "I never dreamed that any mere physical experience could be so stimulating." She tells him that she has felt that emotion only a few times in her life, such

as when listening to her "dear brother's sermons when the Spirit was really upon him." This moment reverses expectations for both of them. Who would have known that this woman, who seems so prim and proper, had such guts and grit—and passion!

This experience invigorates Rosie to confront Allnut about his behavior. She throws out his fourteen bottles of gin. And that leads him to start to change—he shaves and cleans the engine.

The next big transformational moment comes when they run another rapid and they make it. Once they're in calm water, they hug and shout "Hip, hip, hooray!" And then—surprisingly—they kiss. From then on, their tenderness for each other comes out. She finds out how many spoonfuls of sugar he likes in his tea—an important detail. Perhaps she's already thinking about the rest of their lives together. She becomes quite girlish as they share a laugh. By the Second Turning Point, their transformation is complete, as is often true in a transformational story.

There is little time for more development of the personal story, because Act 3 is the payoff of all the work of Act 2. Rosie and Allnut prove their togetherness by setting out to torpedo the *Luisa*. They're captured—and yet, at least they're together. They ask to be married as their last wish before they are hanged. So, the spinster of Act 1 has become a married woman at the end of Act 3. The drunkard of Act 1 has become the cleaned-up guy of Act 3. They adore each other! And they have accomplished both the personal and the bigger story.

The Adaptation

If you want to learn the basics of how to adapt a novel, *The African Queen* is one of the best films to study. Every adaptation is a transformation. Although some books adapt more easily than others, all adaptations have to subtract and add and change and modify and translate words into visuals. They have to move the psychology of the character from a subjective inner voice into externals that we can actually see. Stories with a strong plot line and strong dramatic characters are the easiest to adapt.

Where does one begin when adapting a novel? You begin with what we might call the bones of the story, or the structure of the story. I usually recommend that you start by going through the book and using a highlighter to pick out every action that can be visualized and dramatized. You might then write out those actions in an outline, so that you can assess whether the novel has all the plot elements needed to create a filmic structure or whether something needs to be added or subtracted or changed in order for it to work. Do you have a Set-Up? Do you have a catalyst that starts the story and the action? Do you have an Act 2 that explores the conflict? Is the conflict between people rather than within people—in other words, is it external and visible to a film audience? Do you have a mission, a goal, an objective, which is declared in Act 1 and resolved in Act 3?

Once you've got a sense of how your story is working, go through the book again with a different color highlighter and mark all the character qualities of the protagonist. Ask yourself if they can be externalized by an actor. If most of the character's qualities are basically thoughts and opinions and ways of thinking, it will be difficult to translate that character from novel to film.

The adaptation of *The African Queen* is quite faithful to the book. Forester's novel has the same sense of action and movement and excitement. It, too, is grounded in the physical: the river, the boat, the cliffs, the reeds, the lake, the hippopotamuses, the crocodiles—many elements that are intrinsically cinematic. It has two very strong characters, which Forester has given nuance and detail, so there is much for great actors to work with.

Most books contain more backstory than a film does. In most cases, this is not important, because we get a clear sense of the characters from their dialogue, what they're wearing, and their attitudes—such as how little Allnut seems to care that the *African Queen* is not in top-notch shape. We can see Rosie's modesty, which befits a spinster of that time period, and we can see Allnut's respect for her as a woman. We don't need to know about their life in England or what kind of parents they had. It's great to read about, but it's not necessary for the film.

When we enter into a book or into a film, we need to know the world, often called the context of the overall story. We need to understand what the audience knows about

that world, and what they don't know. In *The African Queen*, the world is a remote African village in 1914. In the book, there is much said about the German control of this region of Africa. There are details about the German who is in charge, and he is given a name. There are details about the conflict between the British and the Germans. Rosie is more clearly established as an Englishwoman, and Allnut is also English, though he's Cockney. In the film, to accommodate Humphrey Bogart's American accent, Allnut is identified as Canadian.

The film begins with a hymn—which is not in the book. It's an effective shortcut, because it takes us immediately into the missionary context and shows the fervor of the Reverend and the fervor of his sister, who is pumping that organ for all she is worth. The writers would need to decide which hymn to use. The hymn they chose is fairly well known to anyone who has grown up in the church, and it is well chosen because it has resonance with the situation. It begins, "Guide me, O thou great Redeemer, Pilgrim through this barren land." Other lines presage what will come: "Bid my anxious fears subside," "Lord, lead me through the wilderness," "so that I shall not falter," "when I walk the bank of the Jordan, because all my fears to sink," and "take me through the roughest waves."

The Characters

The novel builds up a number of character elements that the film has to express through visuals and a line of dialogue here and there. Rosie is determined to do something for her country, which is England. She truly hates these Germans who caused the death of her brother and who destroyed the village that had been her life for ten years. Also, she is a traditional woman in many ways. She has chosen to support her brother in his ministry, denying her femininity and her opportunity for marriage and children, as well as her opportunity for love and passion. This idea is discussed throughout the novel, in detail, whereas the film has only a few moments that help us understand the social context of the woman in service to the man.

Our first image of Rosie is as the supporter of her brother. She is the organist. When she and the Reverend and Allnut have tea, she is a gracious hostess as she

serves them, but she is not the leader. And when her brother dies, she serves him to the very end. The book says more about how she served him in his ministry and looked after him in his dying days.

The African Queen makes use of one of my favorite techniques: the Rule of Threes. This rule tells us that it takes only three story beats to set up a clear pattern. If you find yourself in doubt about how many times you need to repeat something to make a point, use the rule of threes. In the film, the first beat shows Rosie playing the organ in support of her brother. The second beat shows Rosie helping her brother when he is beaten. The third beat shows Rosie being obedient to what would be expected of her, taking care of her brother to the very end with his burial. When she gets on Allnut's decrepit boat, she begins a new phase, a new story development, as she discovers her freedom to become her own self. Her former life has ended with a period: the church is destroyed. The congregation is gone. The brother is dead. There is no choice but for her to move ahead and away from that life, in one way or another.

In any story, the character must have sufficient motivation to enter into it. And we need to believe that the character is capable of doing what that particular story requires. There are plenty of movies in which the female character is an airhead, who does not seem credible because she's simply not capable of the demands of the story. Who believes the James Bond women in tight shorts are actually nuclear physicists? But Rosie is no airhead. The word I've used to describe Rosie in those first few minutes of film is "intrepid." As you watch the film, think about what words you might use to describe that first imprint on your mind of who this woman is. You might use words like "determined" or "perseverance" or "committed"—all qualities Rosie needs in order to be the protagonist of this story: to enter into it and be willing to follow it to the bitter end.

Another technique that helps to establish a character is repetition. We see Rosie drinking tea several times, which clarifies her British background and sense of tradition. We see Rosie react several times to Allnut's stash of gin: the "devil drink," in the eyes of a religious person, which must be gotten rid of! We see Rosie reading the Bible and praying several times, which demonstrates her firm religious belief.

A case can be made that Rosie and Allnut are co-protagonists of *The African Queen*. But if you look closely, you will see that Rosie is the one who is moving the story forward. The novel is clearly focused on her—with detail about how she feels, about her backstory, about her emotions. The idea of sinking the *Luisa* is hers. The changes in Allnut come about as a result of her influence. Rosie is driving the action, and that is the core quality of a good protagonist.

Rosie is smart. She remembers little snippets of information she has overheard, and feeds them to Allnut. She knows a little bit about welding. She knows a little bit about torpedoes. She's really good at figuring things out and at learning new things. The novel tells us how quickly Rosie learned to read the river—what the little ripples around rocks mean, and how to avoid them. She figured out how the tiller worked and the nuances of steering, and understood the danger if she wasn't up to the task. We see hints of that skill and attitude in the movie. It doesn't take us long to realize she's doing a pretty good job at the helm.

The other main character needs to contrast with this protagonist, while providing whatever is necessary for the protagonist to accomplish the goal of the story. On the obvious level, Allnut fulfills that external function. He has skills. He can keep the motor running. He understands this boat, its flaws and its abilities, and he understands what will be required to accomplish the goal.

On the personal level, Allnut has a rather lazy, laissez-faire attitude toward life. He's one of those people who does the minimum. But he also respects women, and he's not a man to argue or fight. The book actually describes him as henpecked—and there is a sense, in the first half of the book, that he is under Rosie's thumb. He loathes conflict and tension, and will do anything to avoid an argument, so when Rosie gives him the silent treatment, it drives him nuts. That's what makes him agree to the mission.

Yet, like Rosie, there is a quality in him that rises to the occasion. He keeps the boat running. Once committed, he is willing to go through rapids, leeches, and even hanging to accomplish the goal that once was hers, and is now theirs.

There is a third character with them on their journey: the boat. It is a "she," as is usual for boats and ships. She is personalized in the book, and to some extent we cheer

for her in the film as well. She gets Rosie and Allnut through many difficult spots, and she too rises to the occasion as needed. When Rosie and Allnut are about to be hanged, the *African Queen*, seemingly of her own will, rams the *Luisa*—saving their lives and accomplishing the mission.

The Theme

There are many different ways of expressing a theme. What's important is that the theme travels through the whole script and is consistent with the action and the characters. I might express the theme of a film differently from how you would express it. I might say that *The African Queen* is a story about "finding freedom." Our characters are on a mission to destroy the German boat, which is taking away the freedom of Africans as well as the British. And I could take that theme and track it through the entire script. I can also track it through the characters, showing how Rosie finds her sense of freedom and free will and a new expanded identity. She discovers her passion. She discovers her skills. She discovers her ability to persuade and even manipulate to get what she wants. And she discovers her flair for adventure and her freedom to make her own decisions—even going so far as to find a loving sexual relationship, which is clarified in the book and implied in the film. Allnut, too, finds freedom in discovering that he is worth something. He discovers that he likes himself better as a sober man than a drunk, and he finds his ability to love and be loved. He moves from a sense of suppression and oppression to a sense of courage and determination.

This film deserves to be called a classic. And it's a wonderful adventure—in spite of the rain, the reeds, and the hippopotamuses.

Study Questions

1. Break down the basic structure of the story and the scene sequences. Notice how the three-act structure works in the scene sequences to keep moving the adventure forward. (You can read more about scene sequences in *Making a Good Script Great*.)

2. Make a list of 20 or 30 words that you would use to describes Rosie and Allnut. If you have the book, take the words from the book that describe them and explain how those qualities are expressed in the film through action, dialogue, and gesture.

3. Write out the transformational beats that move each character from where they start at the beginning of Act 1 to where they end up in Act 3. How many are there? Read about the transformational arc in my book *Advanced Screenwriting*, where I break down *As Good as It Gets* and *Tootsie*.

4. To what extent is the boat personalized? How is the *African Queen* contrasted with the *Luisa*?

5. How would you define the theme of this film? Often, when thinking about theme, you can use a verb before the word that embodies the theme, to show that the theme is a process. My example above is "finding freedom." What might your theme be?

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