

Status

Status Stories concern the protagonist's quest to rise in social standing, as well as the price they pay to do so. These stories explore social mobility and the nature of success.

The Life Values at Stake are **SUCCESS** and **FAILURE**. We create the typical range for a Status Story by adding the contrary, **COMPROMISE**, and negation of the negation values, **SELLING OUT**. The movement of the narrative depends on the subgenre's cause and effect statement.

| Status Life Value Range | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Positive | Success: accomplishment of protagonist-specific goal |
| Contrary | Compromise: settling for partial goal fulfillment |
| Negative | Failure: lack of fulfillment of protagonist-specific goal |
| Negation of the Negation | Selling Out: success while betraying morality |

The Status protagonist's best chance for a positive result happens when, with the help of an effective mentor, they adjust their goal to be reasonable in light of their circumstances. If the goal is too ambitious, they risk **FAILURE** or **SELLING OUT** by betraying their morality. If the goal is not ambitious enough, they risk **SELLING OUT** because they appear successful but don't fulfill their potential.

Because the definition of **SUCCESS** is protagonist-specific, it's useful to connect the typical Life Values with the protagonist's specific position within their setting. For example, Rocky defines **SUCCESS** as "taking shots" and "going the distance." **COMPROMISE** is becoming a real contender. He falls to **FAILURE** when he behaves like a bum, and **SELLING OUT** happens when he pretends he's a contender, but fights second-rate boxers because he knows he can win or won't "take shots" and risk getting his nose broken in a fight.

Pathetic

Friedman's Cause & Effect Statement: *When a sympathetic protagonist, who has weak character and is too unsophisticated to see the consequences of their actions, experiences misfortune without the guidance of an adequate mentor, they will fail to rise in social standing.*

To create a Status Pathetic Story, the Life Value progresses from COMPROMISE to SELLING OUT and rebounds to FAILURE if the protagonist adjusts their goal.

The opening value is COMPROMISE because the protagonist seeks to rise in social status and pursue her goal. The Pathetic protagonist, usually through no major fault of their own, not only fails to rise, but suffers death or deep personal disgrace in the end after SELLING OUT. She can rise to FAILURE or COMPROMISE by rejecting a choice that jeopardizes her moral code.

Masterwork: [Tess of the D'Urbervilles](#), 2008 BBC television series adapted by David Nicholls from [Thomas Hardy's 1892 novel of the same name](#) and directed by David Blair.

Beginning Hook

Extreme poverty along with inadequate and selfish mentors force Tess Durbeyfield to call on the rich widow D'Urberville and claim kinship for a chance to gain employment. The widow's son, Alec, connives to rape Tess when he can't gain her affection otherwise. Tess returns home pregnant and without marriage prospects.

Tess begins the story in a state of COMPROMISE. Her parents pressure her to claim kinship with a family she knows she's not related to. She justifies her actions because, without a horse, her father can't conduct the trade that supports the family. By the end of the Beginning Hook, her family is better off (Alec sends them a horse so she'll feel beholden to him), but Tess's Life Value is FAILURE because she returns home a fallen woman.

Middle Build

Tess's baby dies and she leaves her family once again (after promising her sister Liza-Lu that she will return for her) to find work on a dairy farm, where she falls in love and marries Angel Clare. She doesn't reveal her past until their wedding night, and Angel, feeling betrayed despite his own sexual encounter, leaves to seek his fortune in Brazil. Tess encounters Alec again while working on a starve-acre farm, and he offers to marry her. She declines, even though she hasn't heard from Angel in over a year.

Tess begins the Middle Build in a state of deeper FAILURE, because she is considered a fallen woman at home and loses her baby, who cannot receive a Christian burial. She gets closest to SUCCESS at the midpoint when she becomes Angel's wife. By the end of the Middle Build, Tess falls to a worse state of FAILURE, because Angel leaves her. Once again, she avoids SELLING OUT by refusing to become Alec's mistress.

Ending Payoff

After Tess's father dies, her mother accepts Alec's help for the family. Convinced that Angel won't return, Tess becomes Alec's mistress. Angel recovers from yellow fever in Brazil and finds Tess, who lashes out and kills Alec for telling her Angel wouldn't return. Tess and Angel run, but the police arrest her, and she is executed.

Tess begins the Ending Payoff in a similar state of FAILURE, but her misfortunes grow when her father's death results in loss of the family home. She sees no choice but to SELL OUT and become "Alec's creature." In the end, she is an executed murderer, but she is free of Alec and reaches a slightly better version of FAILURE by securing Angel's promise to marry and care for her sister Liza-Lu (which allows her to fulfill a promise she made).

Additional Thoughts about the Story Arc

Tess's goal, or her definition of SUCCESS, is to marry for financial security (a rise in social standing), but also for love. She lacks an adequate mentor to guide her in adjust her aims so she can reach SUCCESS without setting herself up for FAILURE with a goal that is too ambitious. In the end, she attains a new goal for Liza-Lu, though it's too late for her to save herself. For Tess, SELLING OUT is when she resigns herself to being "Alec's creature." This, along with the belief that Angel doesn't love her, represents a fate worse than death to her.

Sentimental

Friedman's Cause & Effect Framework: *When a sympathetic protagonist, with a steadfast will but naive worldview, encounters a challenge or opportunity and has a supportive mentor of high moral character, he can rise in social standing.*

To create a Status Sentimental Story, the Life Value progresses from within negative territory (FAILURE or SELLING OUT) to SUCCESS when the protagonist (appropriately) chooses to reject the world they sought to join.

Masterwork: [Rocky](#), the 1976 film written by Sylvester Stallone and directed by John G. Avildsen.

Beginning Hook

Rocky, a once-promising amateur boxer, loses his private locker at his gym because Mickey, the gym owner, tells him he's no longer a contender and fights only bums. Rocky recognizes that Mickey is right.

Rocky begins the story in a state of SELLING OUT because he wins his fights by taking on opponents who are bums. He chooses goals that are so low, he can appear SUCCESSFUL, but he's FAILED to pursue his potential. He falls in social standing at the gym when his belongings are put on "Skid Row." As the Beginning Hook comes to a close, he recognizes that he's a hypocrite for advising other people to take risks because he doesn't follow his own advice. With this awareness, he progresses in a positive direction toward FAILURE.

Middle Build

Rocky accepts the challenge to fight heavyweight boxing champ Apollo Creed, as well as Mickey's help as his manager. He trains steadily and follows Mickey's advice.

Rocky begins the Middle Build in a similar state of FAILURE, but quickly begins taking risks to restore his status as a contender and live up to his potential. The Middle Build ends in a state of COMPROMISE because he's changed his goals to something more ambitious (winning the fight), but his fighting is still sloppy and not good enough to win.

Ending Payoff

The night before the fight, Rocky realizes he can't win the match with Creed, though he's tried his best. He changes his goal to "going the distance" because no one's ever done that against Creed. Rocky finishes fifteen rounds, and though he loses the fight, the decision is split.

Rocky begins the Ending Payoff in a state of COMPROMISE because his goal is unreasonable, but in the end, he achieves SUCCESS by rejecting the inappropriate goal and adopting one that is a challenge yet within his grasp.

Additional Thoughts about the Story Arc

Rocky, like other Sentimental protagonists, has a steadfast will, which means he has the potential to achieve **SUCCESS** if only he can choose an appropriate goal or definition of **SUCCESS**. The Life Values shift incrementally in a positive direction as he listens to his mentor and understands what his goal should be (not too low, not too high), then uses his will to do what's necessary to achieve it. **SUCCESS** becomes going the distance against a worthy opponent, **FAILURE** is being a bum by not taking risks in pursuit of a goal, and **SELLING OUT** is pretending to be **SUCCESSFUL** while being a bum.

Tragic

Friedman's Cause & Effect Statement: *When a sympathetic protagonist, ambitious and sophisticated enough to see the consequences of their actions, lacks an adequate mentor and makes a serious mistake in their attempt to rise, the result is a tragic fall in social standing, and often death.*

To create a Tragic Story, the Life Value progresses from positive territory but shy of SUCCESS to SELLING OUT and then rebounds to FAILURE in the end when the protagonist rejects the world they sought to join.

Masterwork: [*A Place in the Sun*](#), 1951 film adapted by Michael Wilson and Harry Brown from Theodore Dreiser's 1925 novel, [*An American Tragedy*](#), and directed by George Stevens.

Beginning Hook

George Eastman takes a working-class job in his wealthy uncle's factory and is infatuated with local debutante Angela Vickers. Contrary to company policy, George develops an intimate relationship with his coworker Alice.

George's Life Value begins shy of full SUCCESS because he seeks and obtains a job with the possibility for advancement. By the end of the Beginning Hook, he falls to COMPROMISE because his goal includes marrying someone like Angela, yet he pursues an intimate relationship with Alice with no thought to marrying her.

Middle Build

George meets Angela at his uncle's party, and the two young people fall in love. Meanwhile, Alice tells George she's pregnant and demands that he marry her. He decides to kill Alice by knocking her into a lake knowing she can't swim, and though he can't follow through with his plan, Alice accidentally falls in the water and drowns.

George begins the Middle Build in a state of COMPROMISE because, even as he moves toward SUCCESS by being promoted to management and dating Angela, he refuses to be honest with Alice about marrying her. At the Midpoint, he comes close to external SUCCESS when his uncle tells George he'll be promoted to the executive level, but he finishes by SELLING OUT because his plan to rid himself of Alice betrays his morality.

Ending Payoff

George is arrested, found guilty of murder, and then sentenced to death. George comes to understand that thinking of Angela when he could have saved Alice makes him guilty of murder in his heart. This helps him accept his death and encourage Angela to move on with her life.

George begins the Ending Payoff with the Life Value SELLING OUT because, although he almost attains external SUCCESS, he sacrifices his morality to avoid revealing his sexual

relationship with Alice. The Ending Payoff closes with George rising to the negative value **FAILURE**. It's too late for him to save Alice or himself from his mistakes, but he accepts responsibility and gives Angela good advice.

Additional Thoughts about the Story Arc

George defines **SUCCESS** as wealth and marriage to a beautiful woman like Angela. **COMPROMISE** is rising to a management after working on the factory floor. **FAILURE** for him would be marrying Alice. George **SELLS OUT** when he plans to kill Alice and refuses to take responsibility.

What makes this story particularly tragic is that we know George could have attained the **SUCCESS** he yearned for if he'd remained patient and steadfast (like a Sentimental or Admiration protagonist). As a character, he can't see into the future any more than his real-life counterpart, and he lacks an adequate mentor (until the end of the story when the minister helps him come to terms with his actions) to help him to stay the course without betraying his morality.

Admiration

Friedman's Cause and Effect Statement: *When a sympathetic protagonist with nobility of character and motive, along with a sophisticated worldview, encounters misfortune they will rise in spite of it.*

To create an Admiration Story, the Life Value begins with SUCCESS and ends with a different version of SUCCESS gained through great personal sacrifice.

The opening value should be the positive, SUCCESS, and despite losses in social position or material wealth, the protagonist rises in honor or reputation to a new version of SUCCESS.

Masterwork: *Gladiator*, 2000 film written by David Franzoni, John Logan, and William Nicholson, and directed by Ridley Scott.

Beginning Hook

After Maximus wins Rome's final battle in the North, the emperor, Marcus Aurelius, asks Maximus to succeed him as the protector of Rome and return power to the Senate and people. The emperor's son, Commodus, kills his father, rather than accept his choice. Maximus refuses to pledge loyalty to Commodus, escapes an assassination attempt, and rides home to find his family killed and his farm burned.

Maximus begins with the Life Value SUCCESS because he wins a great battle for Marcus Aurelius through strength and honor. Several people ask him what he will do since he's won his final battle, and he answers repeatedly that he will serve Rome, though he tells the emperor he would like to go home. By the end of the Beginning Hook, Maximus experiences FAILURE. He doesn't become the protector of Rome, and though he goes home, his family is lost to him. He resigns himself to FAILURE with hopes of joining his family in the afterlife, but Rome isn't done with him yet.

Middle Build

Maximus is sold as a gladiator and refuses to participate. He learns to win over the crowds, first in northern Africa and then Rome. Commodus discovers his identity, and the emperor's daughter asks Maximus to save Rome from her brother. Maximus agrees to do so at the head of his army, which is still loyal to him and waits outside the city.

The Middle Build opens with the Life Value FAILURE because, at first, he refuses to participate and only wants to join his family in the afterlife. But with guidance from his owner-mentor, Proximo, Maximus quickly garners the respect of his fellow gladiators and the love of the crowd. By the end of the Middle Build, Maximus attains a level of COMPROMISE that is close to SUCCESS. He agrees to lead the army against Commodus to realize Marcus Aurelius's dream that the power of Rome be given to the Senate.

Ending Payoff

Although Proximo releases Maximus to join his army, Commodus discovers the scheme and seeks to “kill the myth” so that he can kill Maximus with the approval of the mob. To achieve this, he plans to fight Maximus in the Coliseum. Unwilling to leave his fate to chance, Commodus cheats by stabbing Maximus before the battle. Despite the injury, Maximus defeats Commodus and tells the crowd and senators to honor Marcus Aurelius’s dream. He fulfills his emperor’s final request before succumbing to his wounds and joining his family in the afterlife.

Maximus begins the Ending Payoff in **FAILURE** because Commodus foils his plan. By the end of the story, Maximus attains **SUCCESS** because he achieves the original task the emperor set for him, though it was achieved through other means.

Additional Thoughts about the Story Arc

Maximus defines **SUCCESS** as (1) fulfilling his duty, which includes fulfilling Marcus Aurelius’s last request to see power in Rome transferred to the senate, and (2) acting with strength and honor. He falls to **FAILURE** when he becomes a slave and refuses to fight and again (fails temporarily to act with strength) and when he’s prevented from leading his army against Commodus (he fails in fulfilling Marcus Aurelius’s request). When he acts with strength and honor, he earns respect, no matter the social setting. **COMPROMISE** happens when Maximus settles for a goal that is short of full **SUCCESS**, but he never betrays his morality. **SELLING OUT** would be to pledge loyalty to Commodus, which would mean abandoning his moral code.

When we say of Admiration stories that “the principled protagonist rises without compromise,” compromise means to betray their moral code. The contrary Life Value means accepting something less than full **SUCCESS** but still in positive territory.

The Story Grid © Shawn Coyne

Learn more at www.StoryGrid.com

Compiled by Kim Kessler (www.trenchcoach.com) & Leslie Watts (www.writership.com)