

- **The Kübler-Ross Change Curve for Story**
- The Kübler-Ross Model was developed by the psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in the late 1960's to describe the sequence of emotional responses she observed in terminally-ill patients coping with their diagnosis and eventual death
 - Although this model is not recognized as a valid theory in psychiatry, owing to lack of empirical support, the framework is nevertheless widely known and has been popularized in fields far outside its original application
 - Sometimes known as “The Five Stages of Grief,” Kübler-Ross’s model has been absorbed into the popular culture to describe the series of emotions relating to any unpleasant event (from break-ups to job loss to any significantly de-stabilizing change in circumstances)
- Following Kübler-Ross’s pattern, the Editor Shawn Coyne has modified the sequence and applied it to the struggles of a protagonist in good fiction
 - Coyne underscores how the protagonist must face adversity in a good story and how that adversity needs to be “metabolized” or processed by the protagonist if she is going to succeed in overcoming it
 - Coyne describes this sequence of processing change using Kübler-Ross’s key concepts and developing some of his own
 - Character in conflict is an essential element of story and Coyne offers an important framework for the writer to consider when thinking about how a character will respond to change and how this series of responses can build the overall structure of a story
- The elements of Shawn Coyne’s modified version of the Kübler-Ross Model of extreme change are
 - **1) Shock**
 - An event occurs that throws a character’s life out of kilter
 - There is an initial shock in the immediate aftermath of what just happened where the event is not even comprehensible at first; it may not even be obvious that something did happen
 - The character may not grasp the full significance of the event
 - **2) Denial**
 - Once the shock of the event wears off and the character appreciates that something significant happened, there is a tendency to deny that anything happened or at least that anything is wrong as a result of what happened
 - This stems from our desire to maintain the familiar status quo
 - We know how to operate in the status quo and what is expected/required of us

- It is an unsettling prospect to a character to think that their familiar mode is now upset
- Denial ends when the character can no longer deny the truth of what happened and its significance
 - Events progress and the situation of the character worsens to such a degree that the character is forced to identify and admit the change in their status quo
- Shock and Denial comprise the “Beginning Hook” of the story
 - An event occurs that throws a person’s life out of kilter
 - There is an initial shock in the immediate aftermath of what just happened
- **3) Anger**
 - Once the character can no longer bullshit themselves about their circumstances and the negative impact that this big event is having on them, the character resorts to getting angry about this new status quo they are in
 - The character blames fate, god, the gods, blames other people around them for being causes of this significant event
 - At this moment of anger the character will often lash out – and in the story this serves to make things worse
 - This is the character’s initial attempt to solve the problem and it in fact worsens their situation and complicates their predicament
- **4) Bargaining**
 - After the character burns off their anger, the search for an alternate way out of their situation
 - They begin to bargain to try and work out the problem
 - Perhaps the character tries to push the problem off to someone else, or tries to change environments to bring about a change in the problem (e.g. moving to a new city)
 - Of course, this bargaining proves fruitless and the character discovers that there is no easy solution to her predicament
 - Not only that, the character realizes that all of this bargaining has only worsened the problem
 - If they had just faced the problem head-on from the outset they would be in a far better position than they are because they have tried avoiding the problem

- Thus, the character finally comes to realize that there is no simple way out of the problem; they're lost; their thus far facile attempts to solve their problem have failed and it means they will have to face their problem in its totality – this brings on depression
- **5) Depression**
 - By now the character realizes that there is a serious problem, a significant event has happened and is affecting them, and the character realizes that there is no turning back to the way things were before the problem, nor is there an easy way to solve or get out of the problem
 - All that is left is to face the awesomeness of the problem
 - This realization leads the character into a deep depression over their problem/situation
 - In stories this is the “all is lost” moment
 - It's finally clear that life will never be the same again
 - For a moment, the character exists in this deep depression without any ability to escape it
- **6) Deliberation**
 - After the character has sat in their depression, they look for possible ways to emerge from this negative state
 - In deliberation, the character decides something must be done about her problem
 - Here the characters undergoes self-reflection and confronts all of her demons that are preventing her from solving this problem she is in
 - The character here is deliberating, weighing the pros and cons of various ways they beat their demons and emerge from their depression
 - Here, for the first time, the character is clearly seeing the problem
 - In this clear seeing of the problem, the character realizes that this is a big problem that will require a big solution and this big solution will cost them dearly
 - The character realizes they are in an existential predicament and will have to fundamentally change themselves in some way to emerge from this problem
 - We appreciate that there is no easy way to solve our problem and that whatever we do will require loss
 - The character appreciates that they will have to sacrifice something to solve this predicament they are in

- The know they will have to lose something in order to gain forward progress and reach a new level of stability
 - Their position is that of a *zugzwang*
 - This is a chess term that describes a situation wherein a player, whose turn it is, cannot make a move without incurring serious consequences and putting themselves at a severe disadvantage in the overall game
 - The character is mature enough now to understand that we'll never get back to "normal" so she stops trying
 - Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Deliberation comprise the "Middle Build," as Coyne calls the middle section
- **7) Choice**
 - The beginning of the ending payoff of the story is how the character chooses to answer her crisis dilemma
 - Choice is the climactic moment when the character actively does something that will "metabolize" the inciting incident and change her life forever
 - And once the character chooses, she barrels forward with implementing her choice
- **8) Integration**
 - Integration comes at the very end of a story and dramatizes the resolution
 - The character has found a new stability, one that is vastly different from where she began
 - She has a whole new outlook on life and is not the same person she was at the beginning
 - At integration, the character has come full circle and recovered from her initial shock
 - No matter what, by the end of the story she will now never go back to where or who she was before
 - There is a global personal point of view change
- Conclusion
- At the beginning of the Kubler-Ross curve the person is experiencing high competence – they are adapted to their life and functioning well within their circumstances
 - The character loses this competence as the change event sets in and the character proceeds to the middle of the story

- By the end of the story, after numerous attempts to solve her problem, the protagonist sacrifices something and is changed and is thus able to transcend or resolve her problem
 - At the end she regains competence but it is a new competence, based on a new identity for the protagonist
- The inciting incident SHOCKS our protagonist, throws her off balance to the point of DENIAL – this hooks the reader’s curiosity about how the denial will come back to haunt the protagonist
 - The beginning of the story transitions into the progressive complications in the middle, when the protagonist can no longer deny her predicament
 - She feels extreme ANGER about her plight, and begins BARGAINING ineffectively to make the problem go away; soon she realizes her life will never be the same and goes into a DEPRESSION over this fact during her all is lost moment until she regroups and begins DELIBERATION about her crisis □
This is the middle hook
 - The character then makes a CHOICE, often called the point of no return, and the story begins to move towards its ending payoff
 - The character makes the choice active during the climax and this results in the INTEGRATION of a new point of view, which is the story’s end resolution
 - This is the “Ending Payoff,” as Coyne calls it
- Finally, it is important to remember that although this sequence of emotions can be seen as occurring in the mind (many of these stages are, after all, feelings), the author must, as Coyne says, “[Dramatize] the psychological turmoil of her protagonist
 - That is, as the character struggles with this sequence of processing a destabilizing event and working toward overcoming it, the writer must use scenes to portray this struggle
 - Otherwise the writer risks merely narrating how the character feels – a technique that will not engage readers who come to story to see character in action
 - Nevertheless, a final consideration must be appended, and that is that the writer must not dramatize these stages in cliché ways
 - An angry person throwing a fit, breaking things; a depressed person considering suicide – these are clichés
 - The writer must innovate when dramatizing this process and give the reader scenes that convey the character’s movement along the change-curve without resorting to predictable setups

- Whether fit for psychiatry or not, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's model certainly captures something plausible about how people (real or fictional) respond to crises
 - As fiction is spawned by crisis, the writer must consider how her character will respond to crisis, and Coyne's modification of the Kübler-Ross Model is a powerful tool that can guide the writer through the rudiments of a character's response