Story Elements: a Few Basic Plots[1]

Many writers have referred to the so-called "basic plots," the plots they claim form the basis of almost every story out there. Some theorists have come up with a list of nine plots, others suggest thirty-six, and still others boil them down to just two. The following briefly describes five that seem the most elemental. Even though creative writing isn't about rules, knowing these plots can help you decide how to tell a story. Of course, most stories mix the plots below one way or another, but most can be traced back to these. Can you can think of others?

Overcoming the Enemy

Overcoming the Enemy stories involve a hero (or team of heroes) who must destroy a super-powerful enemy (a monster, villain or other evil) threatening the community. Usually the decisive fight occurs in the bad guy's lair, and often the hero has some cool weapon or power at his disposal. Sometimes the bad guy is guarding a treasure or holding a princess captive. The hero escapes in the end with his prize.

Examples: Star Wars, The Avengers

Rags to Riches

The Rags to Riches plot involves a hero who seems quite commonplace, poor, downtrodden, and miserable but has the potential for greatness. The story shows how he manages to fulfill his potential and become someone of wealth, importance, success and happiness.

Examples: King Arthur, Cinderella, Aladdin, Star Wars

As with many of the basic plots, there are variations on Rags to Riches that are less upbeat.

Variation 1: Failure

The "dark" version of this story is when the hero fails to win in the end, usually because he sought wealth and status for selfish reasons.

Variation 2: Hollow Victory

The hero may achieve her goals, but only in a way that is hollow and brings frustration because she has sought them only in an outward and self-centered way. So the hero has outward success, but inwardly she fails since she fails to satisfactorily resolve her inner conflict. Sometimes her discovery of the hollowness leads to a new conclusion in the final act.

Quest

Quest stories involve a hero (sometimes a reluctant one) who embarks on a journey to obtain a great prize or other good that is located far away.

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[1] Original by Glen C. Strathy; revised and adapted by Joseph Sigalas. The basic plots here come from a book by Christopher Booker.

Examples: The Odyssey, Voyage of the Dawn Treader; Lord of the Rings (though here the goal is losing rather than gaining the treasure)

A variation on this plot is a story in which the object being sought does not bring the expected happiness. *Raiders of the Lost Ark.*

Voyage and Return

Voyage and Return stories feature a hero who journeys (or gets taken) to a world that at first seems strange but enchanting. Eventually, the hero comes to feel threatened and trapped in this world and must he must make a thrilling escape back to the safety of his home world.

A variation is the "Fish Out of Water" story, in which the character finds herself in a new world or new reality in which little she knew before helps at all. Again, she learns to understand—and even love—her new world, but ultimately she must return to her home.

Examples: Back to the Future, Bolt, ET, The Wizard of Oz, Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver's Travels

Rebirth/Redemption

Rebirth stories involve someone who is trapped in a living death by a dark power or villain until he or she is freed by another character's loving act.

The hero in the Rebirth/Redemption plot sometimes does not solve his own problem but must be rescued by someone else, and therefore can avoid resolving his or her inner conflict. This is why some people dislike fairy tales: the heroines are usually so passive.

The Disney version of Beauty and the Beast solves the problem by making Belle the main character (she rescues Beast). Though Marley intervenes to rescue Scrooge in A Christmas Carol, Scrooge ultimately chooses to change and therefore saves himself. (Hint: any new version of Sleeping Beauty could make the Prince the main character.)

Examples: Sleeping Beauty, A Christmas Carol, Beauty and the Beast, Anne of Green Gables

TWO OTHERS: Comedy and Tragedy

The last two are really more *genres* (types) than actual plots, but they represent two very general approaches to story that are good to be aware of.

Comedy

We all expect comedy to be funny, but really makes a story a "comedy"? It's more than just humor. Traditionally, theorists have said that a comedy is almost any story that ends happily. The main character achieves the main story goal, or the outer conflict (in *Princess Bride,* for example, Wesley rescues Buttercup) and satisfactorily resolves his inner conflict (in *PB,* the two are reunited).

But there's more to it than that. A more detailed understanding of comedy involves its stages:

1. At the beginning, all is well in the community—until something happens to throw everything into confusion. Sometimes the confusion is the result of an oppressive or self-centered person, sometimes the hero himself blows it somehow, or sometimes the disruption just happens.
2. The confusion worsens until it reaches a crisis the hero must resolve.
3. The resolution restores order. The truth comes out, perceptions change, and relationships heal (and typically end in marriage for the hero).

Tragedy

Like Comedy, Tragedy is often defined by its ending. Tragedies generally end in the main character's death or similar destruction, but more significantly their errors have all but ruined the lives of everyone around, too. Traditionally, tragedies have unfolded something like this:

1. At the beginning, often the hero and the community are at some great height—a new marriage has occurred, a battle has been won, a new king or queen crowned. Usually, tragic heroes are highly placed in their communities—they are royalty, generals, etc.
2. Something happens, almost always as a result of the main character's pride or some other fault to which he is blind. This error throws everything into confusion—not just for the character but also for the whole community. If the character is a king, often this means new war.
3. The hero tries everything to avoid facing the real issue, and all his efforts lead only to more suffering for everyone. Everything gets worse and worse.
4. In a final crisis, one that often costs the hero his life, the hero sees the truth at last. Sadly (that is, tragically), it's too late for him to change course.
5. However, the hero's death somehow restores order for the community.

Examples: Macbeth, Hamlet, Oedipus Rex, Dr. Faustus, Romeo and Juliet