

The Seven Basic Plots

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I. Overcoming the Monster

A. Basic Format

- a. Superhuman “evil” exists that must be eliminated
 - i. Form of giant or witch
 - ii. Form of ravaging animal
 - iii. Could take the form of both
- b. Threatens the general peace of town village or world
 - i. Reward may be great prizes
 - ii. Reward may be a princess
- c. Hero must confront the Monster
 - i. Generally armed with some “magical” weapons
 - ii. Generally happens near monster’s lair (cave, forest, castle, lake)
 - iii. Generally happens against great odds against success
- d. Destruction seems inevitable
 - i. When the hero narrowly escapes death
 - ii. Monster is slain
- e. Universal peace restored

B. Beowulf as Example

- a. Story told in three parts
 - i. Young Beowulf against (semi-human) Grendel – Monster threatening peace
 1. Travels from over the sea
 2. Deals a mortal wound (in a night-battle)
 - ii. Young Beowulf against Grendel’s Mother – Monster seeking revenge
 1. Tracks Grendel’s blood to find a bigger battle awaiting
 2. Battle ensues at bottom of lake
 3. Beowulf wins: awarded riches and kingdom for 50 years
 - iii. Old Beowulf against Dragon –
 1. Dragon guards treasure in underground cave (roused from sleep)
 2. Awakens and wreaks havoc on Beowulf’s kingdom
 3. Three battles: Beowulf dies in third battle (poisoned)
- b. Christian Symbolism
 - i. Hero dies, but slays his enemy
 - ii. Aided in victory by a helper, who becomes his successor
 - iii. The Number 3
 - iv. His spirit lies over the land: “soul leaves the body to receive the reward of the ‘just’”

II. Rags to Riches

A. Basic Format

- a. Hero/Heroine introduced in childhood
 - i. Living in lowly conditions (poor, isolated)
 - ii. Considered lowly and, as of yet, unformed socially, physically
- b. Live in the shadows of “Dark Figure”
 - i. Adult figures acting as parents
 - ii. Antagonists close in age
 - iii. Both are scornful, hard-hearted, or blind
- c. “Dark vs. Light”
 - i. Light character is always essentially good
 - ii. Light character is generally static – stays the same throughout the story
 - iii. Dark figures made uneasy by Light, or they disappear in the story
- d. Transformation
 - i. Move from inward beauty to outward beauty
 - ii. Meet a complimentary figure (male, female)
 - iii. Inherit some sort of “Kingdom”
- e. Basic Crisis
 - i. Low-born follows a Call – “newly discovered power/purpose”
 - ii. Initial Success: arrives at outward completion – money, wealth, power, fame
 - iii. Central Crisis: New (unforeseen crisis) with Dark Figure arises
 - iv. Hero/Heroine overcomes crisis to arrive at personal, inner maturity/independence

B. Cinderella as Example

- a. Daughter of rich man
 - i. Father dies, left to live with stepmother
 - ii. Becomes the house’s scrub lady
- b. Living with Step-Mother and Step-Sisters
 - i. Mother oppresses her
 - ii. Sisters treat her poorly
 - iii. Cinderella shows love to animals, who return the love
- c. Transformation
 - i. The Ball
 - ii. Fairy God-Mother intervenes
 - iii. Becomes most beautiful girl at the ball
- d. Clock Strikes Twelve
 - i. Garners the prince’s favor
 - ii. Chariot dissolves into pumpkin
 - iii. Locked into her castle
 - iv. Rescued and restored to rightful place of beauty

III. The Quest

A. Basic Format

- a. Destruction Falls
 - i. Hero, who has been seeking peace, is roused
 - ii. Hero sets out with companions
 1. Indistinguishable (tied to purpose)
 2. One Alter-Ego (Faithful to hero, but opposite)
- b. The Journey
 - i. Succession of near-fatal ordeals followed by moments of peace
 - ii. Stuck in rough terrain (nature, monsters, temptation)
- c. Arrival and Frustration
 - i. Arrives with goal in sight
 - ii. Encounters new, more terrible obstacles
- d. Final Ordeals
 - i. Undergoes last set of tests (generally 3)
 - ii. Culminates in Last Great Battle
- e. The Goal
 - i. Nearly misses goal because of terrible danger
 - ii. Overcomes through Thrilling Escape from Death
 - iii. Peace restored
 - iv. Hero gains elevated status
 - v. Life renewed

B. Braveheart as Example

- a. Wallace looking for peaceful family life
 - i. Returns home after studying warfare
 - ii. Befriends Hamish
 - iii. Marries – wife is killed
- b. Leaves village to confront England
 - i. Stuck in countryside/terrain
 - ii. Struggle against the Nobles
- c. Nobles betray Wallace at Falkirk
 - i. Wallace about to die
 - ii. Saved at last minute by Robert the Bruce
- d. Wallace attacks and kills Nobles
 - i. Faces Queen
 - ii. Faces King
 - iii. Faces Nobles (finds alter-ego in Bruce)
- e. Goes to York to meet with Nobles
 - i. Defeated (personally)
 - ii. Memory of Wallace fuels the fight
 - iii. Scotland achieves Freedom

IV. Comedy

A. Evolution of Comedy

- a. Aristophanes – Dominated by two groups of characters
 - i. One dark, rigid, life-denying group
 - ii. One light, liberation group
 - iii. Turn of the Plot = Dark group turned away from obsessions
- b. New Comedy – Comedy becomes love story
 - i. Resolves the problem of two lovers
 - ii. Change of Heart central to resolution
 - iii. Recognition must occur before Happy Ending
- c. Shakespearean Comedy – Tangled love
 - i. Diverse pairing of couples
 - ii. Couples serve as contrast
- d. Summary
 - i. Dark characters imprison light characters
 - ii. Characters “discovered” over course of story
 - iii. Characters discover who they should pair with
 - iv. All separation is repaired/reconciled

B. Comedy II – Plot Disguised

- a. General Confusion
 - i. People question who they are
 - ii. People question why they are where they are
 - iii. People question what they are doing
- b. Transition between two states
 - i. Twilight – Nothing is seen clearly
 - ii. Recognition – Dark figure of story is discovered
- c. Shadow of Confusion
 - i. Upper Realm: Dark Figures hold power over lesser figures
 - ii. Lower Realm: Lives in the Dark Forces’ shadows
- d. Three Types
 - i. Dark force casts shadows over other characters
 1. Real Hero lies within shadow of Dark Reign
 2. Dark Figure exposed, transformed, or eliminated
 - ii. Chief Dark Hero is the hero himself
 1. Wronged Heroine/Hero stands in shadows
 2. Hero goes through change of heart
 3. Hero and Heroine Emerge together
 - iii. No obvious dark figure
 1. General misunderstanding becomes the tension
 2. Truth redeems victims from oppressive circumstances
 3. Everyone comes to clearer understanding of situation

V. Tragedy

- A. Anticipation Stage
 - a. Hero/Quest is unfulfilled
 - b. Hero sees a course of action
- B. Dream Stage
 - a. Hero becomes committed to course of action
 - b. Pursuit goes improbably well
 - c. Hero gratified in his effort
- C. Frustration Stage
 - a. Situation slowly turns
 - b. Leans toward committing “Dark Acts” to carry out duty
 - c. “Shadow Figure” threatens Hero
- D. Nightmare Stage
 - a. Hero loses control of situation
 - b. Dark Forces close in on him
- E. Destruction or Death Wish Stage
 - a. Evil forces become aroused
 - b. Final act of violence kills hero
- F. Divided Self
 - a. The Call seems questionable to reader – not noble
 - b. Hero pursues call because of personal appetites
 - i. Romantic notions
 - ii. Undefined longing or sensation
 - c. Hero struggles with call
 - i. Not single-minded about obligation
 - ii. Hero keeps his dark impulses in check
 - iii. Hero leaves comparative safety after lines have been crossed
 - iv. Hero overlooks key element before embarking
 - d. Hero becomes increasingly isolated
 - i. Roused from peace out of obligation
 - ii. Initially defines mission according to those he helps
 - iii. Becomes increasingly detached from community and isolated in his own thoughts
 - iv. Becomes increasingly/more deeply ensnared in the Quest
 - v. Comes to destruction

VI. Rebirth

- I. Three Stages
 - a. The Curse
 - i. Main character inhabits dark, threatening force
 - ii. Main character given omen to overcome
 - iii. Dark force counteracted by “light” – promise to overcome
 - b. Protection Stage
 - i. Light figures protect against dark forces
 - ii. Main figure grows in innocence of curse
 - iii. Dark Prophecy comes true
 - c. The Re-birth Stage
 - i. Dark, impenetrable forces maintain oath
 - ii. Hero lives in wintery state until helper comes along
 - iii. Helper defeats/Light promise takes effect and changes Main Character
- II. Basic Sequence
 - a. Young hero falls under shadow of dark power
 - b. All goes well; threat seems to be defeated
 - c. Heroes find themselves imprisoned in dark, wintery state
 - d. Stays in dark state until dark power seems triumphant
 - e. Miraculous redemption – by hero, by Young Woman, by child
- III. Example in Literature
 - a. Snow White
 - i. Six fairies invited to christening; Seventh (malevolent) fairy curse child for not being invited
 - ii. Parents hide child; burn spindles; raise her as “Briar Rose”
 - iii. Sixteenth birthday comes (curse almost defeated); finds a woman weaving in castle
 - iv. Falls asleep in witches castle, fortified by briars, warlocks, dragons
 - v. Prince defeats the enemy to place “true loves kiss”

VII. Voyage and Return

IV. Three Stages

- a. Anticipation Stage
 - i. Hero/Heroine Exposed to new reality
 1. May be bored, drowsy reckless
 2. May be curious and go looking for alternative reality
 - ii. Hero/Heroine pushed out of their limited existence into a world of possibility
- b. Dream Stage
 - i. Finds the new experience exhilarating
 1. Puzzling
 2. Unfamiliar
 - ii. Chooses to make it their home
- c. Frustration Stage
 - i. Introduced to Dark Force that frustrates their happiness
 - ii. Dark Shadow continues to intrude
- d. Nightmare Stage
 - i. Shadow dominates the alternative world
 - ii. Grows larger than hero/heroine and entire community
- e. Thrilling Escape and Return
 - i. Situation becomes impossible
 - ii. Leave the "reality" not knowing of it was real or a dream

V. Example in Literature

- a. Alice in Wonderland
 - i. Alice lives "in her own world", filled with fascination
 - ii. Alice falls into Rabbit Hole
 - iii. Meets the Rabbit and gets swept into fantastic journey
 - iv. Meets the Queen Hearts
 - v. Returns back home, not sure if she had been napping