

The Seven Basic Plots

Digested By Greg Smith from

“The Seven Basic Plots”

By Christopher Booker

The Seven Basic Plots

1. Overcoming the Monster
2. Rags to Riches
3. The Quest
4. Voyage and Return
5. Comedy
6. Tragedy
7. Rebirth

(And the unspoken basic plot : Mystery)

1. Overcoming the Monster

- The hero is called upon to face and overcome a terrible and deadly personification of evil.
- The Evil is...
 - Heartless
 - Egocentric
 - Seemingly All-powerful
 - Ultimately has a blind spot that renders it vulnerable

1. Overcoming the Monster

1. Anticipation Stage & 'Call'
 - We become aware of the monster from a distance
 - We gradually learn of its reputation
 - Monster casts shadow over community
 - The hero experiences a "Call" to confront it
2. Dream Stage
 - The hero makes preparations for battle
 - For a while all seems to be going well
 - We feel comfortable and immune from danger
3. Frustration Stage
 - We come face to face with the Monster and its awesome power
 - The hero seems tiny and alone
 - The hero may fall into the monster's clutches
 - There seems only one outcome
4. Nightmare Stage
 - The final ordeal begins
 - A nightmare battle with all the odds in the Monster's favor
 - Just when all seems lost comes the "reversal"
5. Thrilling Escape from Death & Death of the Monster
 - In the nick of time the monster is dealt a fatal blow
 - The community is liberated
 - The hero emerges to win the prize
 - Often the hand of the princess
 - Succession to the 'kingdom'

1. Overcoming the Monster

- Examples
 - Jack and the Beanstalk
 - Star Wars
 - James Bond
 - Jurassic Park
 - The Magnificent Seven (The Seven Samurai)

2. Rags to Riches

- Some young, unrecognized hero is eventually lifted out of obscurity or poverty to a state of great splendor and happiness. But their upward progress is not a continuous climb.

2. Rags to Riches

1. Initial wretchedness and the “Call”
 - We meet the hero in their initial lowly state
 - Usually overshadowed by ‘dark’ figures
 - The dark figures mistreat the hero
 - Something happens to call or send them into a wider world
2. Out in the World
 - Initial success
 - Make the first encounter with the princess
 - Some small bit of outdoing the ‘dark’ forces
 - Our hero is not quite ready for complete fulfillment
3. The Central Crisis
 - Everything suddenly goes wrong
 - The hero becomes separated from what has become important to them
 - Overwhelmed with despair
 - This is their lowest point
4. Independence and the Final Ordeal
 - As the hero emerges from their crisis they have renewed independent strength
 - The hero faces a final test
 - A dark rival that stands between him and his goal
 - Defeating this rival will allow the hero to move to the final stage
5. Final Union, Completion and Fulfillment
 - Usually some sort of union with the Princess
 - Rise to some sort of role in the “Kingdom”
 - The hero appears to be whole for all the future (the lived happily ever after)

2. Rags to Riches

- Examples
 - Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer
 - David Copperfield
 - Jane Eyre
 - Pretty Woman
 - Aladdin
 - Cinderella

3. The Quest

- The hero is pulled towards some distant all-important goal. There are side-trips that get resolved along the way. But the story is not complete until our hero achieves the overarching goal.

3. The Quest

1. The Call
 - Life is oppressive and intolerable
 - The hero sees the only way to fix it is to go on a long journey
 - He is given supernatural or visionary direction as to the goal
2. The Journey
 - The hero (and companions) set out across hostile terrain
 - They encounter monsters and temptations
 - There may be several ordeals ending in a ‘thrilling escape’
 - Alternating periods of rest, and advice from mentors
 - Journey into the ‘underworld’ and may contacts ‘spirits’ who give guidance
3. Arrival and Frustration
 - The hero arrives within site of his goal
 - Far from reaching the goal because there are a series of obstacles
 - The obstacles must be overcome before he can get his prize
4. The Final Ordeal
 - The hero has to undergo a series of tests (often three) to prove he is worthy
 - Culminating in a final great battle
 - The most threatening of all
5. The Goal
 - After a ‘thrilling escape from death’ the goal (kingdom, princess, treasure) are finally won.
 - And the promise of “living happily ever after”

3. The Quest

- Examples
 - Watership Down
 - The Wizard of Oz
 - The Lord of the Rings (The Hobbit)
 - Raiders of the Lost Ark

4. Voyage and Return

- The hero is abruptly transported out their “ordinary world” into an “abnormal world” and eventually back to where they began.

4. Voyage and Return

1. Anticipation Stage and “fall” into the other world
 - The hero is young, naïve, bored, drowsy, or reckless
 - “Something happens” and they are transported into a new world
2. Dream Stage or Initial Fascination
 - At first the hero is excited or fascinated because the new world is puzzling or unfamiliar
 - But it not a place where they feel at home
3. Frustration Stage
 - Gradually the mood changes to frustration, difficulty, or oppression
 - A shadow begins to intrude
 - And becomes increasingly alarming
4. Nightmare Stage
 - The shadow begins to dominate
 - It poses a serious threat to the hero’s survival
5. Thrilling Escape and Return
 - Just when the threat is closing in, the hero escapes
 - Returning back to where they came from
 - The question is posed as to how much the hero learned from his experiences
 - Have they grown, or was it all ‘just a dream’

4. Voyage and Return

- Examples
 - Alice in Wonderland
 - The Time Machine
 - Robinson Crusoe
 - The Odyssey
 - Gulliver's Travels

5. Comedy

- This is not a 'funny' plot, but one where the characters get what they want in the end.
- The key to Comedy is the transition between two states.
- The first state which persists through most of the story where nothing is seen clearly; where people's true nature or identity may be obscured and there is uncertainty (caused by some dark figure) as to who ends up with whom.
- The second state arrives with the 'recognition' and 'unknotting' when, at the climax of the story, the dark figure is in some way caught out, and all is at last seen clearly.

5. Comedy

- We see a little world in which people have passed under a shadow of confusion, uncertainty, and frustration, and are shut off from one another.
- The confusion gets worse until the pressure of darkness is at its most acute and everyone is in a nightmarish tangle.
- Finally, with the coming to light of things not previously recognized, perceptions are dramatically changed. The shadows are dispelled, the situation is miraculously transformed and the little world is brought together in a state of joyful union.

5. Comedy

- Examples
 - Four Weddings and a Funeral
 - Singin' in the Rain
 - Some Like It Hot
 - Ten Things I Hate About You (Taming of the Shrew)
 - Dude, Where's My Car?

6. Tragedy

- This is a plot where the hero does not get what he desires, and often ends up dead.

6. Tragedy

1. Anticipation Stage

- The hero is incomplete or unfulfilled
- The hero looks for some sort of unusual gratification
- Some object of desire presents itself
- The hero becomes focused on this object

2. Dream Stage

- The hero becomes committed to his course of action
- Things go well for a while
- Seems to be 'getting away with it'

3. Frustration Stage

- Things begin to go wrong
- The Hero begins to feel frustrated
- He may feel compelled to commit 'dark acts'
- A shadowy figure may appear.

4. Nightmare Stage

- Things are out of the hero's control
- He has a mounting sense of threat and despair
- Forces of opposition and fate are closing in on him

5. Destruction or Death Wish Stage

- Either by the forces or by some final act of violence the hero is killed (or by suicide)

6. Tragedy

- Examples
 - Romeo and Juliet
 - Samson and Delilah
 - Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde
 - Julius Caesar
 - Bonnie and Clyde
 - Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid
 - The Picture of Dorian Gray

7. Rebirth

1. A young hero falls under the shadow of the dark power.
2. For a while, all may seem to go well. The threat may even seem to have receded.
3. Eventually it approaches again in full force, until the hero is imprisoned in the state of living death.
4. This continues for a long time, when it seems the dark power has completely triumphed.
5. But finally comes the miraculous redemption: by some other hero/heroine.

7. Rebirth

- Examples
 - Sleeping Beauty
 - Snow White and the Seven Dwarves
 - The Secret Garden

8. Mystery

- Begins by posing a riddle (a crime is committed)
- Our interest then centers around the efforts of our hero to unravel the riddle
- A Mystery is very much the detective looking in on another story which is one of the other 7 plot types.