The Seven...Actually Nine Basic Plots According to Christopher Booker

By Glen C. Strathy

Continuing our discussion of *The Seven Basic Plots* by Christopher Booker, this page presents a brief outline of the plots themselves. (For more detailed discussion and examples, you should probably read the book.)

In the previous article, we noted that Booker actually discusses nine archetypal plots, but only really approves of the first seven. We're going to look at all of them here briefly, partly because we think they have all been successful and partly because its good for writers to be familiar with all of them.

Also, we noted that, although Booker argues that the basic plots all follow a five-stage structure, it is easier to reconcile his theories with those of others by presenting them in terms of a four-act structure, with the terminals of each act marked by an event called a driver or turning point. Of the five drivers found in a four-act structure, Booker only pays attention to two of them: The Call (which is either the first or second driver) and the Final Driver (which Booker gives various names to, depending on the archetypal plot. We'll omit the others too, for simplicity's sake.

So, without further ado, here are the nine basic plots...

1. Overcoming the Monster

Overcoming the Monster stories involve a hero who must destroy a monster (or villain) that is threatening the community. Usually the decisive fight occurs in the monster's lair, and usually the hero has some magic weapon at his disposal. Sometimes the monster is guarding a treasure or holding a Princess captive, which the hero escapes with in the end.

Basic Plot	Act 1	Driver	Act 2	Act 3	Act 4	Final Driver
Overcoming the Monster	Anticipation: The threat of the monster becomes known	The Call: The hero is called upon to confront the monster.	Dream: All begins well as the hero prepares to face the monster or journeys to confront it.	Frustration: Coming face to face with the monster, the hero appears to be outmatched.	Nightmare: The final battle with the monster, which seems hopeless for the hero.	Hero overthrows the monster, escapes (possibly with a treasure or Princess, and gains a kingdom.

The "Overcoming the Monster" Plot

Examples: James Bond films, *The Magnificent Seven*, *The Day of the Triffids*

2. 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.

Basic Plot	Act 1	Driver	Act 2	Act 3	Act 4	Final Driver
Rags to Riches	Initial wretchedness. We see the hero in a humble, unhappy state	The Call: The hero is called into the wider world.	Out into the world: Hero enjoys initial success, gets a taste of higher status, possibly meets their true love (who is someone previously above them).	Central crisis: Everything goes wrong. Hero is separated from their true love.	Independence and final ordeal. Hero discovers his true strength and proves it be defeating his rival.	Hero wins his true love and obtains a permanent higher status.

Examples: King Arthur, *Cinderella, Aladdin.*

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

Variation 1: Failure

What Booker calls 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. Dramatica (and most other theorists) would call this a tragedy.

Variation 2: Hollow Victory

Booker's second variation are stories where the hero "may actually achieve [his] goals, but only in a way which is hollow and brings frustration, because he again has sought them only in an outward and egocentric fashion." Another way to describe this would be a comi-tragic ending or personal failure. In Dramatica terms, it's an outcome of success, but a judgment of failure since the hero fails to satisfactorily resolve his inner conflict.

The Heroic Quest

3. Quest

Quest stories involve a hero who embarks on a journey to obtain a great prize that is located far away.

E.g. *Odyssey, Watership Down, Lord of the Rings* (though here the goal is losing rather than gaining the treasure), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom.*

Other variations on this basic plot include stories where the object being sought does not bring happiness. For example, *Moby Dick, Raiders of the Lost Ark.*

Basic Plot	Act 1	Driver	Act 2	Act 3	Act 4	Final Driver
The Quest	Story begins in a "City of Destruction" where life is intolerable or oppressive.	The Call: The hero gets a vision or supernatural call that says the key to making things better is to go get something from far away.	The Journey: Hero travels to the goal, having adventures along the way, gaining helpers and encountering monsters, temptations, dangers, and the ghosts of failed questers.	Arrival and frustration: within sight of his goal, the hero finds another terrible set of obstacles to overcome.	Final Ordeals: Hero faces a final set of tests and his toughest fight yet.	The Goal: Hero survives and gets the treasure, Princess, kingdom, etc. forevermore.

The Quest Plot

4. Voyage and Return

Voyage and Return stories feature a hero who journeys to a strange world that at first seems strange but enchanting. Eventually, the hero comes to feel threatened and trapped in this world and must make a thrilling escape back to the safety of his home world. In some cases, the hero learns and grows as a result of his adventure (Dramatica would call this a judgment of good). In others he does not, and consequently leaves behind in the other world his true love, or other opportunity for happiness. (Dramatica would call this a judgment of bad)

Basic Plot	Act 1	Driver	Act 2	Act 3	Act 4	Final Driver
Voyage and Return	We see a hero who is bored, curious, reckless, or otherwise open to a new experience.	Hero is suddenly transported to a strange new world.	Dream: Hero explores the new world, finding it puzzling but fascinating.	Frustration: Gradually, the world becomes alarming, frustrating, oppressive, or difficult.	Nightmare: A serious threat to the hero's survival arises.	Thrilling escape and return.

Examples include: *The Wizard of Oz, Coraline, Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver's Travels, Lord of the Flies.*

5. Comedy

Here's where things get confusing.

Traditionally, comedy has been defined in several ways.

1. As any story that ends happily. In Dramatica terms this means that the story goal is obtained (outcome=success) and the main character has satisfactorily resolved his inner conflict (judgment=good).
2. As a story which is humorous or satirical.
3. With New Comedy or Romantic Comedy: as a drama about finding true love (usually young love). Traditionally these stories have ended in marriage.

Booker makes a valiant attempt at a better definition of comedy, but finds he cannot apply the same plot structure to it as with the other basic plots. Instead, he loosely defines Comedy in terms of three stages:

1. The story takes place in a community where the relationships between people (and by implication true love and understanding) are under the shadow of confusion, uncertainty, and frustration. Sometimes this is caused by an oppressive or self-centred person, sometimes by the hero acting in such a way, or sometimes through no one's fault.
2. The confusion worsens until it reaches a crisis.
3. The truth comes out, perceptions are changed, and the relationships are healed in love and understanding (and typically marriage for the hero).

6. Tragedy

Tragedy, along with Comedy, is usually defined by its ending, which makes these two unlike the other basic plots. In Dramatica terms, a tragedy is a story in which the Story Goal is not achieved (outcome=failure) and the hero does not resolve his inner conflict happily (judgement=bad).

Booker's description of this plot is close to that of the classic tragedies (Greek, Roman, or Shakespearean).

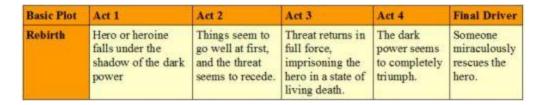| Basic Plot	Act 1	Driver	Act 2	Act 3	Act 4	Final Driver
Tragedy	Anticipation: We start with a hero who is unfulfilled and wants more.	Temptation: The hero finds focus in some object of desire or course of action (usually something forbidden).	Dream: The hero commits to his goal and things go amazingly well for him.	Frustration: Gradually, things start to go wrong and the hero may resort to desperate and unwise actions that cannot be undone.	Nightmare: Hero loses control of the situation. Forces of opposition close in on him.	Hero is destroyed in some way.

The Tragedy Plot

7. Rebirth

Rebirth stories show a hero (often a heroine) who is trapped in a living death by a dark power or villain until she is freed by another character's loving act. As with Comedy, Booker's outline of this plot is sketchy.

One of the big problems with this plot is that the hero does not solve his own problem but must be rescued by someone else, and therefore can avoid resolving his inner conflict. This is why many women hate fairy tales: the heroines are 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* should make the Prince the main character.)

Basic Plot	Act 1	Act 2	Act 3	Act 4	Final Driver
Rebirth	Hero or heroine falls under the shadow of the dark power	Things seem to go well at first, and the threat seems to recede.	Threat returns in full force, imprisoning the hero in a state of living death.	The dark power seems to completely triumph.	Someone miraculously rescues the hero.

The Rebirth Plot

Examples include *Sleeping Beauty, A Christmas Carol, Beauty and the Beast, The Secret Garden*

Basic Plots Booker Dislikes...

The last two basic plots are ones which Booker clearly sees as inferior, because they are less about the main character embracing his feminine side.

8. Mystery

First, he defines Mystery as a story in which an outsider to some horrendous event or drama (such as a murder) tries to discover the truth of what happened. Often what is being investigated in a Mystery is a story based on one of the other plots.

Booker dislikes Mysteries because the detective or investigator has no personal connection to the characters he's interviewing or the crime he's investigating. Therefore, Booker argues, the detective has no inner conflict to resolve.

This may be true of many Mysteries, including some by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie. However, in other Mystery stories the detective does have a personal stake in the plot, which gives rise to inner conflict — often a moral dilemma. *Chinatown is* one example that springs to mind. So is *Murder on the Orient Express* and *The Maltese Falcon* (just to name some classics).

Nonetheless, it is true that Mysteries often do not leave one with the sense that the world has been totally healed (after all, innocent victims are still dead). This sets it apart from most of the basic stories – with the exception perhaps of Tragedy.

9. Rebellion Against 'The One'

The last of Booker's basic plots, Rebellion Against 'The One' concerns a hero who rebels against the all-powerful entity that controls the world until he is forced to surrender to that power.

The hero is a solitary figure who initially feels the One is at fault and that he must preserve his independence or refusal to submit. Eventually, he is faced with the One's awesome power and submits, becoming part of the rest of the world again.

In some versions, the One is portrayed as benevolent, as in the story of Job, while in others the reader is left convinced it is malevolent, as in *1984* or *Brazil.* These darker versions seem to be what make Booker less than keen on this basic plot.

Though Booker doesn't mention it, a common variation is to have the hero refuse to submit and essentially win against the power of the One. In *The Prisoner*, the hero eventually earns the right to discover that the One is a twisted version of himself, after which he is set free. In *The Matrix*, Neo's resistance eventually leads to a better world. Another example is *The Hunger Games* series, where Katniss's continued rebellion eventually leads to the downfall of both the original tyrant and his potential successor, resulting in a freer world.