



## SEVEN BASIC PLOTS

Writing a plot outline is important, it's the blueprint of your story and the overall driving force that your readers cling to as they explore your story's pages.

"The Seven Basic Plots" by Christopher Booker, a remarkable book that at last provides a comprehensive answer to the age-old riddle of whether there are only a small number of *basic stories* in the world. Using a wealth of examples, from ancient myths and folk tales via the plays and novels of great literature to the popular movies and TV soap operas of today, it shows that there are seven archetypal themes which recur throughout every kind of storytelling.

But this is only the prelude to an investigation into how and why we are 'programmed' to imagine stories in these ways, and how they relate to the inmost patterns of human psychology. Christopher Booker leads us through the extraordinary changes in the nature of storytelling over the past 200 years, and why so many stories have *lost the plot* by losing touch with their underlying archetypal purpose.

In his book, he talks about 7 basic plot structures, and 2 plot structures he finds to be inferior. This article gives a brief outline of the plot structures and what they entail. We will discuss these during a writer's craft session.

### OVERCOMING THE MONSTER

**ACT ONE – ANTICIPATION:** The threat of the monster becomes known.

**DRIVER – THE CALL:** The hero is called upon to confront the monster.

**ACT TWO – DREAM:** All is well as the hero to face the monster or journey before him.

**ACT THREE – FRUSTRATION:** Coming face to face with the monster, the hero is outmatched.

**ACT FOUR – NIGHTMARE:** The final battle with the monster. No hope for the hero.

**FINAL DRIVER:** Hero overthrows the monster, escapes.

### RAGS TO RICHES

**ACT ONE:** We first see the hero in poor, downtrodden and miserable conditions.

**DRIVER– THE CALL:** The hero is called to the wider world to fulfil their destiny.

**ACT TWO:** The hero gets a taste of the good life, riches, wealth, success, love.

**ACT THREE – CENTRAL CRISIS:** Everything goes wrong and falls apart. The hero is separated from love and other goodies.

**ACT FOUR:** Hero finds independence and strength, faces and defeats his enemy.

**FINAL DRIVER:** Hero wins. True love is returned and the hero obtains a permanent high status.

Now, this plot structure can vary depending on the outcome the writer, wants the story to have. This is where Booker adds his two variations:

**VARIATION ONE – FAILURE:** Booker calls this the ‘dark’ version of the story. How is it dark? The hero fails to win in the end. Perhaps because he sought wealth and status in a selfish and greedy way, or perhaps because a sacrifice required a dark ending. This is known as a tragedy.

**VARIATION TWO – HOLLOW VICTORY:** This variation is where the hero achieves success, however through a hollow victory. This hollow victory could be through his selfish desires or a personal failure. This usually results in judgment being placed upon the protagonist.

## QUEST

**ACT ONE:** Story begins in a ‘City of Destruction’ whereby life is intolerable or oppressive.

**DRIVER – THE CALL:** The hero gets a vision, supernatural call or other driving forces that state the key to making things better it to go and get something far away.

**ACT TWO – THE JOURNEY:** Hero travels to the goal, experiencing adventures along the way, gathering adventures, fighting monsters and temptations.

**ACT THREE- ARRIVAL AND FRUSTRATION:** with the goal in sight, the hero must face another obstacle/s to overcome.

**ACT FOUR – FINAL ORDEALS:** Hero faces a final set of tests and his toughest fight yet.

**FINAL DRIVER – THE GOAL:** Hero survives and gets treasure, love, kingdom, etc forevermore.

## VOYAGE AND RETURN

**ACT ONE:** Enters a hero who is bored, reckless, curious, and open to new experiences.

**DRIVER:** Hero is suddenly transported to a new world.

**ACT TWO – DREAM:** The hero explores the new world, finding it fascinating and enchanting.

**ACT THREE – FRUSTRATION:** Over time, the world becomes alarming and overwhelming. This causes the hero to become frustrated.

**ACT FOUR – NIGHTMARE:** A serious threat to the hero’s life arrives.

**FINAL DRIVER:** Thrilling escape and return to their world.

## **TRAGEDY**

**ACT ONE – ANTICIPATION:** The story starts with a hero that is unfulfilled and wants more.

**DRIVER – TEMPTATION:** The hero finds focus in someone or something.

**ACT TWO – DREAM:** The hero commits to his goals and everything goes extremely well for him.

**ACT THREE – FRUSTRATION:** Things soon begin to go wrong and the hero may resort to desperate and unwise actions that cannot be undone.

**ACT FOUR – NIGHTMARE:** The hero loses control of the situation. Forces opposing him close in.

**FINAL DRIVER:** Hero is destroyed in some way.

## **REBIRTH**

**ACT ONE:** The hero is under the shadow of a dark power or villain.

**ACT TWO:** Things seem to be going well and the threat is fading.

**ACT THREE:** Threat returns imprisoning the hero in a state of living hell.

**ACT FOUR:** The dark power or villain seems to have won.

**FINAL DRIVER:** Someone miraculously rescues the hero.

## **COMEDY**

This plot structure is a bit different from the rest. Initially, traditional comedy looks something like this:

- A story that ends happily.
- A story which is humorous or satirical
- A comedy/love story ending in marriage.

Booker takes a new perspective on this, though, slightly turning it on its head and taking a better look to find a more suitable definition.

- 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-centered person, sometimes by the hero acting in such a way, or sometimes through no one's fault.
- The confusion worsens until it reaches a crisis.
- The truth comes out, perceptions are changed, and the relationships are healed in love and understanding (and typically marriage for the hero).

## **MYSTERY**

This is one of the inferior plot structures that Booker has singled out. First, he states that the plot structure of *Mystery* has a story in which an outsider experiences some horrendous event and tries to discover what exactly happened.

A good point that he makes is that a Mystery is basically a story that is based on other plots other than your character. He also states that he is not a big fan of mysteries as your protagonist has no personal connection to the characters he is interviewing or the crime he is investigating. So in all, the character has no inner conflict to battle, and therefore no inner resolution.

If you are planning to write a Mystery novel, then don't let this deter you. Break apart your plot and delve deep into the depth of the story. Make personal connections or a way that your character can battle and overcome some sort of conflict.

## **REBELLION AGAINST THE 'ONE'**

The second plot structure in Booker's inferior category is *Rebellion Against The 'One'*. This plot structure revolves around a hero who rebels against an all-powerful entity. This power controls the world until he is forced to surrender to that power.

The hero is usually a solitary figure who feels the 'One' is at fault and that the hero must preserve his independence, morals and honor and refuse to submit to the 'Ones' power. Eventually, the hero is faced with the 'One's' controlling power and submits, becoming part of the rest of the world again.

It's easy to understand why Booker feels this plot structure is inferior, because honestly, what was the point of it all? As a reader, that is how you would feel. But there are ways in which you can change that. Perhaps add depth into why the hero is rebellion? Is it an emotional connection to the one? Instead of submitting to the 'One', have your hero go out in a blaze of glory, having the plot of the story means something, and opening up the prospect that perhaps through this sacrifice a change is to come in the future.